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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

A DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF
SCRIPTURE IN THE VARIANT VERSIONS OF THE
APOCRYPHON OF JOHN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY

DAVID ANDREW CREECH

CHICAGO, IL

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The wise sage Qohelet tells us that “a threefold chord shall not be quickly broken” (Eccl 4:12, *NRSV*). Many strands made up the chord that supported me throughout the dissertation process. I would not have finished without the gracious help and encouragement of several key friends and colleagues. Thanks are first due to the Theology Department at Loyola University Chicago. I appreciated the collegial atmosphere and the open sharing of ideas. The faculty helped me hone my critical thinking and writing skills. Drs. Tobin and Di Vito served admirably on my committee, offering timely and incisive feedback. The dissertation was greatly strengthened by their input. I cannot thank my director, Dr. Lupieri, enough. He went above and beyond what can be reasonably asked of a director and provided just what I needed—feedback, ideas, even the gentle (perhaps sometimes too gentle) nudge forward—throughout the entire process. The staff, especially Catherine Wolf and Marianne Wolfe, helped me manage and navigate the labyrinthine (and not so labyrinthine) university requirements. My cohort provided camaraderie and helped me grow ideas. Carl Toney, in particular, was a dear friend and sounding board. The strongest strands of support came from my family. Dad and Mom instilled in me from early on a love for the text and a desire to learn. My sisters and brother—Julie, Elizabeth, Jamie, and Jonathan—believed in me and offered regular encouragement. Finally, deepest thanks are to my wife, Jessica, and our kids, Ian, Ela, and Dylan. We all got much more out of

this than we bargained for and I am grateful for your patience and endurance. Jessica, you gave the most of all, and I dedicate this work to you.

For Jessica

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ABD* Freedman, David Noel, editor. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 volumes. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- ANF* Roberts, Alexander and James Donaldson, editors. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. 1885-1887. 10 volumes. Repr. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994.
- BDAG* Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Crum* Crum, W. E. *A Coptic Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939.
- DNTB* Evans, Craig and Stanley Porter, editors. *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000.
- EDNT* Balz, Horst and Gerhard Schneider. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. 3 volumes. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990-1993.
- Lampe* Lampe, G. W. H. *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961-1968.
- LSJ* Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, and H. S. Jones. *A Greek English Lexicon*. 9th edition with revised supplement. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- NA*²⁷ Aland, Barbara and Kurt, editors. *Novum Testamentum Graece*. 27th edition. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993.
- NHL* Robinson, James M., editor. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. 3rd revised edition. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.
- OCD*³ Hornblower, Simon and Anthony Spawforth, editors. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 3rd revised edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- TDNT* Kittel, Gerhard and Gerhard Friedrich, editors. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. 10 volumes. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964-1976.

CHAPTER ONE

PRELIMINARIES

Introduction

In the second and third centuries of the Common Era, diverse breeds of Christianity proliferated and engaged in rigorous debate about the essence of the nascent faith. In addition to debating basic understandings of God, Christ, the problem of evil, and so on, the various types of Christianity struggled to articulate the role of earlier texts and traditions, both sectarian and mainstream. In this pluriform and contentious context the *Apocryphon of John* emerged and evolved with its own distinct understanding of the Christian message. This dissertation explores how the *Apocryphon* confronts both text and tradition in its presentation of Christianity.

History of Research

Origins and Classification¹

For the last fifty or so years, the key debates in the study of the texts from Nag Hammadi have revolved around the origins and classification of the ancient religious

¹ The summaries that follow are informed by Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Michael Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). See also the helpful literature reviews of Alastair Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: A Study in the History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), xiii-xxiv; Simone Pétremont, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism*, trans. Carol Harrison (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 1-25; and Carl B. Smith II, *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 1-71.

movement that is commonly labeled “Gnostic.”² Within these debates, how a given text or set of texts engage the Jewish scriptures is generally used in service of the questions of whence Gnosticism arose and/or what precisely Gnosticism was (if anything at all).

Although I seek to answer a different set of questions in this dissertation, several of my suppositions are dependent upon this discussion. A brief outline of the various positions is thus in order.

Four Perspectives on the Origins and Classification of Gnosticism

In 1957, the scholar of early Christianity R. McL. Wilson concluded that if scholars were to grasp “the development and mutual relationship of the various Gnostic sects,” they would first have to establish a functional chronology and definition of the movement.³ Just over fifty years later, in spite of major colloquia and numerous books and articles,⁴ those tasks are still incomplete. There remain essentially four options for the origins and classification of Gnosticism: 1) a Christian heresy, born out of the Christian movement; 2) a product of oriental syncretism, later blended into earliest

² On my decision to continue the use of the terms “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism,” see pp. 16-17 below.

³ R. McL. Wilson, “Gnostic Origins Again,” *VC* 11 (1957): 93-110, here 109.

⁴ The colloquia to which I refer are the 1966 colloquium in Messina, the proceedings of which were published in Ugo Bianchi, ed., *Le origini dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina, 13-18 Aprile 1966* (SHR 12; Leiden: Brill, 1967), the 1978 International Conference on the Texts from Nag Hammadi in Québec, published in Bernard Barc, ed., *Colloque International sur les Textes de Nag Hammadi (Québec, 22-25 août 1978)* (BHNC, Section “Études” 1; Québec: Les presses de l’Université Laval, 1981), and the International Conference of Gnosticism at Yale (1978), archived in Bentley Layton, ed., *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28-31, 1978*, 2 vols. (SHR 41; Leiden: Brill, 1981). For further references, see the following bibliographies: David M. Scholer, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography, 1948-1969* (NHMS 1; Leiden: Brill, 1971); *idem*, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography, 1970-1994* (NHMS 32; Leiden: Brill, 1997); *idem*, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography, 1995-2006* (NHMS 65; Leiden: Brill, 2009). A number of the important figures contributing to the discussion and their books and articles are summarized below.

Christianity; 3) a fundamentally Jewish sect, later married to Christian ideas; and 4) a breed of Christianity, developing alongside other Christianities, later reified in an effort to define the boundaries of “normative” Christianity. Each will be briefly discussed in turn.

The traditional perspective: Gnosticism as a derivation of or deviation from Christianity

Until the nineteenth century, and continuing into the twentieth, the Church Fathers were our primary source of information on ancient Gnosticism.⁵ Heresiologists, such as Irenaeus of Lyon,⁶ Hippolytus of Rome,⁷ Tertullian of Carthage,⁸ and Epiphanius of Salamis,⁹ wrote responses to what they saw as insidious challenges to their understanding of the Christian faith. Other writers, such as Clement of Alexandria¹⁰ and

⁵ For the critical editions and important secondary works on the ancient authors mentioned in this paragraph, see Hubertus Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried Schatzmann (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007). Generally reliable English translations of all the authors mentioned in this paragraph are available in the *ANF* and *NPNF* collections.

⁶ The key work of Irenaeus is obviously *Adversus haereses*. The standard critical edition is A. Rousseau, L. Doutreau, C. Mercier, and B. Hemmerdinger, ed., *Contre les hérésies*, 10 vols. (SC 100, 152, 153, 210, 211, 263, 264, 293, 294; Paris: Cerf, 1965-1982).

⁷ Hippolytus major work is *Refutatio omnium haeresium* (critical edition: M. Marcovich, *Refutation of All Heresies* [PTS 25; New York: de Gruyter, 1986]).

⁸ See esp. *Adversus Marcionem* (critical edition: E. Evans, trans. and ed., *Adversus Marcionem*, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972]), *Adversus Valentinianos* (critical edition: J. C. Fredouille, ed., *Contre les Valentinien*, 2 vols. [SC 280, 281; Paris: Cerf, 1980-1981]), *De praescriptione haereticorum* (critical edition: R. F. Refoulé and P. de Labriolle, ed., *Traité de la prescription contre les hérétiques* [SC 46; Paris: Cerf, 1957]), *Scorpiace* (critical edition: G. Azzali Bernadelli, ed. *Scorpiace* [BPat 14; Florence: Nardini, 1990]).

⁹ Epiphanius offers a “medicine chest” to deal with various heresies in *Panarion* (*Adversus haereses*). The critical Greek text is Karl Holl, *Ancoratus. Panarion (haereses 1-33)* (Leipzig, 1915); the standard English translation is Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, 2 vols. (NHS 35, 36; Leiden: Brill, 1987-1994).

¹⁰ Clement wrote against the Valentinian Theodotus in *Excerpta ex Theodoto* (critical editions: R. P. Casey, ed., *The Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria: Edited with Translation, Introduction and Notes* [London: Christophers, 1934] and F. Sagnard, ed., *Extraits de Théodote: texte grec, introduction*,

Origen,¹¹ wrote treatises against various Gnostic teachers and movements, all the while incorporating some of their ideas. Still other Church Fathers, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, wrote histories of the Church with certain distinctive, anti-heretical tendencies.¹² In general, up until the early twentieth century, scholars of early Christianity accepted the patristic assertion that the Gnostic movement evolved out of Christianity as a distortion of true Christian faith.¹³

Though this perspective has fallen out of favor,¹⁴ it does have some modern champions with formidable arguments.¹⁵ First, of the evidence that survives, even that

traduction et notes [SC 23; Paris: Cerf, 1948]). Clement also cites many Gnostic teachers and works in his *Stromateis*, not all of them pejoratively. Clement even saw Christian Gnosis as an ideal (though his definition of Gnosis is distinct from his less “orthodox” contemporaries—see Riemer Roukema, *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity*, trans. John Bowden [London: SCM, 1999], esp. pp. 151-53).

¹¹ Origen has references to Gnostics scattered throughout his grand corpus. Especially valuable are Origen’s commentary on John that interacts with an earlier commentary written by the Valentinian Heracleon and his response to Celsus (*Contra Celsum*) that contains some Gnostic fragments. The critical editions of Origen’s commentary on John are E. Preuschen, ed., *Der Johanneskommentar* (GCS 10; Leipzig, Hinrichs, 1903) and C. Blanc, ed., *Commentaire sur saint Jean*, 5 vols. (SC 120, 157, 222, 290, 385; Paris: Cerf, 1964-1992). For *Contra Celsum*: M. Borret, ed., *Contre Celse*, 5 vols. (SC 132, 136, 147, 150, 227; Paris: Cerf, 1967-1976). The standard English translation is Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

¹² I refer here to Eusebius’ *Historia ecclesiastica*, available in the Loeb Classical Library: Kirsopp Lake and J. E. L. Oulton, ed., *The Ecclesiastical History*, 2 vols. (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926-1932).

¹³ The oft-cited dictum of the learned Church historian Adolf von Harnack offers a one-line summary of this perspective: Gnosticism is essentially the “acute Hellenization of Christianity” (*History of Dogma*, trans. from 3rd German ed. [New York: Dover Publications, 1961], I:226).

¹⁴ PHEME PERKINS (*Gnosticism and the New Testament* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 206 n.2), speaking specifically to the work of Simone Pétremont, is satisfied to offer only a one-line critique, asserting that the idea is “outdated.” Birger Pearson (“Eusebius and Gnosticism,” in *The Emergence of the Christian Religion*, ed. *idem* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004], 147-68, here 150) caustically remarks that such a position “[flies] in the face of the primary evidence now available to scholarship.”

¹⁵ See esp. A. D. Nock, “Gnosticism,” in *HTR* 57 (1964): 255-79; Simone Pétremont, *A Separate God*; Michel Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques: Codex de Berlin* (Sources Gnostiques et Manichéennes 1; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1984); Alastair Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy*; and *Idem*, *The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

from Nag Hammadi, all the texts are Christian. One must strip away the Christian elements to reconstruct the putative pre-Christian document.¹⁶ Second, and related, there is no pre-Christian evidence of Gnosticism.¹⁷ The debates with Gnostics are limited to the second century CE and later,¹⁸ the texts that survive are generally dated to the fourth century CE and later, and the great myths (such as the so-called “Redeemer Myth”) reconstructed by the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* are composite and dependent upon very late traditions (ninth-tenth century CE). Third, and finally, any non-Christian origin proposed for Gnosticism cannot adequately account for the beginnings of the movement.¹⁹ These arguments, however, have failed to convince the majority of modern specialists in early Christianity.

Edwin Yamauchi (*Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973]; “The Descent of Ishtar, the Fall of Sophia, and the Jewish Roots of Gnosticism,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 [1978]: 143-75) argues strenuously that there was no pre-Christian Gnosticism. Although some of his statements may seem to suggest that he is arguing for an essentially Christian origin of Gnosticism, it appears that he understands Gnosticism to be the confluence of Iranian, Jewish, and Christian elements.

¹⁶ Of the possible exceptions (i.e., texts that betray little or no Christian influence), such as *Apoc. Adam*, *Par. Shem*, and the Hermetic Corpus, it can be argued that these have been de-Christianized or that the Christian elements have been intentionally obscured.

¹⁷ Argued forcefully by Yamauchi, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ It is also worth noting that when the disputes emerge in the second century, they are almost exclusively intra-Christian debates. If Gnosticism is a Jewish or pagan phenomenon, why then is there so little evidence of a dispute? On the evidence of a late Jewish response to the Gnostic doctrine of “Two Powers,” see Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (SJLA 25; Leiden: Brill, 1977). Our only evidence of pagan assaults on Gnosticism comes from Plotinus, *Ennead* 2.9, though it is clear in Porphyry’s report that all Gnostics known to Plotinus and himself were Christians. Of course, earlier, in the last third of the second century CE, Celsus had lambasted Gnostics, and he too thought they were Christians.

On a related note, Pétrement, *op. cit.*, 15-16, wonders if it is truly possible that the Church Fathers who experienced their opponents firsthand could somehow be less informed than we are some 1,800 years after the dispute.

¹⁹ In other words, if the movement is originally Jewish, why then did they break so severely with Judaism? What is the impetus for the new movement, and what led to such vitriol? If the movement is

The History of Religions: oriental syncretism

In the early twentieth century, doubts began to be expressed about the Christian origins of Gnosticism.²⁰ The German *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, led principally by Richard Reitzenstein and Wilhelm Bousset, used what they perceived to be thoroughly pagan (i.e., non-Christian) examples of Gnostic texts to demonstrate that at its core Gnosticism need not necessarily be a Christian phenomenon. The key methodological move here was a turn away from the Church Fathers to primary sources, such as *Poimandres* in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Mandaean texts recently translated and published by Mark Lidzbarski.²¹ Their interpretation of texts such as these divorced Gnosticism from early Christianity, thus opening the question of whence Gnostic ideas arose. To answer this question, they turned to Iranian sources and reconstructed the “original” Gnostic myth of the *Urmensch*. They believed that this myth predated Christianity and informed the ethos of many early Christian writers.²²

Christian, on the other hand, we have then impetus for the break, as well as some fuel for the rage. On this, see Pétremont, *Separate God*, 10-12.

²⁰ Earlier still, Moritz Friedländer (*Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1898; repr. Farnborough: Gregg International, 1972]), had put forth the argument of a Jewish Pre-Christian Gnosticism against which Philo of Alexandria had written. His thesis was not well received initially but has since become the dominant paradigm. See Birger Pearson, “Friedländer Revisited: Alexandrian Judaism and Gnostic Origins,” in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, ed. idem (SAC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 10-28.

²¹ Mark Lidzbarski, *Ginzā: Der Schatz, oder, das Grosse Buch der Mandäer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1925).

²² One of the fullest expressions of this perceived influence is seen in Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, ed. R. W. N. Hoare and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971).

Although the main arguments of this thesis have since been generally rejected, the History of Religions School did succeed in creating sufficient doubt about the Christian origins of Gnosticism.²³ That doubt led to the present consensus.

The current scholarly consensus: the fundamentally Jewish origins of Gnosticism

The idea that Gnosticism emerged as a result of pre-Christian Oriental syncretism held sway until the middle of the twentieth century.²⁴ The discovery of the texts at Nag Hammadi in 1945 provided scholars of early Christianity with a cache of 52 primary sources,²⁵ several of which were previously unknown.²⁶ Close study of these texts revealed a thorough acquaintance with Jewish traditions, both scriptural and exegetical. Moreover, confirming the suspicions of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, it was evident that many of the texts, particularly those usually identified as “Sethian,” exhibited only superficially Christian characteristics.

Most contemporary scholars, particularly in Germany and North America, thus find a Jewish background for Gnosticism compelling.²⁷ Three factors support this

²³ A development lamented by Pétrement, *op. cit.*, 2-3 and extolled by King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 107-09.

²⁴ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 141-48, credits Carsten Colpe (*Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* [FRLANT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961]) with ringing the death knell in 1961. It should be noted, however, that at least one influential modern scholar still finds merit in an Iranian provenance. See Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, ed. and trans. R. McL. Wilson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984).

²⁵ Five of the tractates have multiple copies, thus the find yielded a net of 46 works. For details, see Birger Pearson, “Nag Hammadi Codices,” in *ABD* IV: 984-93, here 987-88.

²⁶ On the discovery and its subsequent drama, see James Robinson, “Introduction,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 1-26.

²⁷ Important supporters of this position include Nils Dahl, “The Arrogant Archon and the Lewd Sophia: Jewish Traditions in Gnostic Revolt,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 689-712; Robert Grant,

conclusion. First, many of the texts exhibit, in the words of Carl Smith, “preoccupation with themes and terms derived from the OT and Jewish speculation.”²⁸ This preoccupation is thoroughgoing: the texts from Nag Hammadi are replete with references to the Jewish scriptures and exhibit awareness of and dependence upon more or less contemporary Jewish exegesis, that of both Palestine and the Diaspora.²⁹ Second, it is argued, the Christian features of several of the texts are superficial and secondary. Once those elements are removed, what remains is some form of Jewish speculation.³⁰ Finally,

Gnosticism and Early Christianity, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966); George MacRae; “Nag Hammadi and the New Testament,” in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, ed. Barbara Aland et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978), 144-57; Idem, “The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth,” *NovTest* 12 (1970): 86-101; Birger Pearson, “The Problem of ‘Jewish Gnostic’ Literature,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, ed. Charles Hedrick and Robert Hodgson (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1986), 15-35; Idem, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*; idem, *The Emergence of the Christian Religion*; Idem, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004); Idem, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Pheme Perkins, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 20-28; Gilles Quispel, “Gnosticism and the New Testament,” in *Gnostic Studies I* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut in het Nabije Oosten, 1974), 196-212; John Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (BCNH, Section “Études,” 6; Québec: Les presses de l’Université Laval, 2001); Idem, “Sethian Gnosticism: A Literary History,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, 55-86; Carl Smith, *No Longer Jews*; Gedaliahu Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (NHS 24; Leiden: Brill, 1984); and Michael Williams (cautiously), “The Demonizing of the Demiurge: The Innovation of Gnostic Myth,” in *Innovations in Religious Traditions: Essays on the Interpretation of Religious Change*, ed. Michael Williams, Collett Cox, and Martin Jaffee (New York: de Gruyter, 1992), 73-107; Idem, *Rethinking Gnosticism*. Kurt Rudolph, *op. cit.*, and Edwin Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, accept that Jewish speculation played a large role in the formation of Gnostic ideas, but also see Iranian influence as essential.

²⁸ Smith, *No Longer Jews*, 39.

²⁹ Palestinian influence is evident in the presence of apocalyptic tradents and awareness of Semitic languages (the latter of which is especially evident in texts such as *Hyp. Arch.*). The Apocalyptic influence will be particularly important to this dissertation. On this, see David Frankfurter, “The Legacy of Jewish Apocalypses in Early Christianity: Regional Trajectories,” in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity*, ed. James C. VanderKam and William Adler (CRINT 4; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 129-200, here, 150-62. As to the Diaspora, Alexandrian exegetical traditions are especially clear. On these traditions, see e.g., Birger Pearson, “Philo and Gnosticism,” in *ANRW II:21.1*, ed. W. Haase (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984), 295-342.

³⁰ This point is reiterated in several of Birger Pearson’s articles. See e.g., Birger Pearson, “Use, Authority and Exegesis of Mikra in Gnostic Literature,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and*

the presence of apparently non-Christian Gnostic (or Gnostic-like) texts demonstrates how these texts could stand independent from Christianity.

In spite of the popularity of this position, it is not without problems. For one, what are we to make of the strongly anti-Jewish flavor of several of the works?³¹ Hans Jonas describes their general disposition as “metaphysical anti-Semitism.”³² Jonas understands the Gnostic caricature of the Jewish creator God to be brought about by a “spirit of vilification, of parody and caricature, of conscious perversion of meaning, wholesale reversal of value-signs, savage degrading of the sacred—of gleefully shocking blasphemy.”³³ How is it that Jews became so disaffected as to vilify the God of their sacred text? Proponents of the Jewish origins have suggested various historical and social situations that would have prompted a reevaluation of previously cherished traditions.³⁴ None have been widely accepted.³⁵ A second problem is that of method.

Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, ed. M. J. Mulder (CRINT 2.1; Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 635-52.

³¹ This problem is spelled out well by Ithamar Gruenwald, “Aspects of the Jewish-Gnostic Controversy,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 713-23.

³² Hans Jonas, “Response to Gilles Quispel’s ‘Gnosticism and the New Testament,’” in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. J. Philip Hyatt (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), 279-93, here 288.

³³ *Ibid.*, 287. This characterization was drawn to my attention by Gerard Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions* (NHMS 58; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 9.

³⁴ The most significant proposals are Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*; Birger Pearson, “Some Observations on Gnostic Hermeneutics,” in *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (Berkeley Religious Studies Series; Berkeley: The Graduate Theological Union, 1979), 243-56; and Smith, *No Longer Jews*. Grant initially proposed that Gnosticism emerged as a result of failed apocalyptic hopes in the wake of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. He himself later retreated from such a view (see Smith, *No Longer Jews*, 58). Pearson in several places (see also his *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 51) speaks of the repeated social and/or psychological upheaval experienced by Jews in the first and second centuries CE that would have been fertile ground for Gnostic speculations. For a fair critique, see Williams, “Demonizing the Demiurge,” 83-86; *idem*, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 226-28. Smith proposes that Gnosticism emerged out of disaffected Jewish circles in the wake of the failed Jewish revolt during Trajan’s reign. So far as I can tell, his thesis has not gained much traction

The presence of Jewish ideas does not necessarily imply Jewish authorship. In addition to the fact that the first Christians were in fact Jews (a demographic of Christianity whose significance perhaps lasted well into the third century and beyond³⁶) and many of the surviving Jewish sources from the period (Philo, Josephus, the LXX, Pseudepigrapha, etc.) have been mediated by Christians, it is clear that by the time that Gnosticism emerged, pagans too had some knowledge of Jewish writings and traditions.³⁷

A recent alternative to the traditional
and consensus positions

Dissatisfaction with both of the aforementioned options and the inevitable
simplifying that accompanies any theory of origins and classification has led several

(see, e.g., the reviews of Jonathan Armstrong, *Calvin Theological Journal*, 42 [2007]: 190-91; Nicola Denzey, *CBQ* 63 [2005]: 542-43; Simon Gathercole, *JSNT* 28 [2006]: 136-37).

³⁵ Pétremont, *A Separate God*, 10-12, in a tempting proposal, sees seeds for such a revolt in the letters of Paul and the Johannine corpus. Pheme Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 18, wonders if in fact Gnostic believers gradually hardened against their Jewish forebears after an experience similar to that of the Johannine community.

³⁶ On this, my thinking was initially influenced by Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 49-71. For recent detailed discussions, see Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik, eds., *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007) and Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

³⁷ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 188. On pagan awareness of the Jewish scriptures, see John Granger Cook, *The Interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (STAC 23; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); Louis Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); John Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism* (SBLMS 16; Nashville: Abingdon, 1972); Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1974-1984); Victor Tcherikover, "Jewish Apologetic Literature Reconsidered," *Eos* 48 (1956): 169-93. Although Tcherikover's conclusion that pagans did not read the LXX until the Christian era is generally accurate, there are several noteworthy exceptions. Beginning in the early third century BCE with Hecataeus of Abdera, we find several likely quotes from the LXX sprinkled throughout various pagan works. In the late second century CE, when the *Apocryphon* was likely penned, Celsus interacted heavily with the LXX, and in the third century CE, Porphyry demonstrates some awareness of its contents. It should be noted that by "pagan," I simply mean neither Jewish nor Christian.

recent scholars to abandon the search altogether. In North American scholarship, Michael Williams mounted the first serious challenge to the category in his 1996 book, *Rethinking Gnosticism*. In that book, Williams demonstrated how the term “Gnosticism” connotes several ideas that serve to distort rather than elucidate the ancient phenomenon.³⁸ In this way, the category acts as a hindrance to a proper understanding of the very thing it is attempting to describe. Williams’ solution was to propose new categories that would be more descriptive and less evaluative. Though the book was well received and several of his points were foundational to subsequent discussion, Williams’ own proposal itself did not find much support.

In 2003, Karen King broached the topic again in her book, *What is Gnosticism?* Through her survey of nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship on Gnosticism, King argued that the categories that have been employed are essentially a “reification of a rhetorical entity (heresy) into an actual phenomenon in its own right (Gnosticism)...”³⁹ In other words, typologies and phenomenologies that are used to ascertain the origins and classification of Gnosticism are doomed to fail because they do not adequately take into account the complexity of ancient culture and religion. Moreover, these typological descriptions are often in service to a description of “normative” Christianity. In other

³⁸ Several of the constructs Williams critiques include protest exegesis, parasitism, anti-cosmic world rejection, asceticism, and libertinism. In each case, Williams demonstrates that 1) The sources reveal a diversity of thought (i.e., there is no monolithic entity) and 2) The categories employed are not neutral but rather in the “description” have already made distorting judgments. Take, for example, protest exegesis. With respect to Point 1, the primary sources reveal a diversity of interactions with the scriptural text—some are more critical (such as *Steles Seth* or *Testim. Truth*) while others are much more affirming (such as *Val. Exp.*); the majority of the texts fall somewhere between those two extremes. As to Point 2, the very term “protest exegesis” is already evaluative of the type of interpretation. What if we saw the interpretation as “hermeneutical problem solving” as Williams suggests? An entirely different picture of the movement would emerge.

³⁹ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 189 and *passim*.

words, when Gnosticism is not understood in its own right, the inevitable result is a distortion. Thus, for King, typology ought to be disposed of and replaced with “analysis of the practices of literary production and social formation.”⁴⁰ Instead of formulating ideas and categories about ancient Christian groups, attention ought to be directed to what can be known about the production of texts and formation of communities around those texts. Although King’s proposal is not without critics,⁴¹ more and more scholars of religion in antiquity are adopting her approach. I understand the present study to be operating under similar assumptions.

The Gnostics and Scripture

Because so many of the primary sources interact with Jewish scripture and traditions, much research has been invested into exploring the relationship of the various Gnostic texts to scripture and tradition. In general, those studies have been in service of the traditional questions of origins and classification.⁴² Although earlier scholarship tended to see the rejection of scripture as the natural outcome of the “acute Hellenization of Christianity,” such a view today is generally rejected.⁴³ We find evidence against such

⁴⁰ Ibid., 190.

⁴¹ Birger Pearson, “Gnosticism as a Religion,” in *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt*, ed. idem (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 201-23, here 213, simply dismisses her position with one line: “I find no merit in her arguments.”

⁴² For further, see Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 54-57.

⁴³ For this early view, see, e.g., von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 1.169-73. The view is somewhat surprisingly echoed in Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 195-228. Although he was more or less a contemporary of von Harnack (he published the original German *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* in 1934), Bauer’s understanding of Christian origins is quite distinct. Rather than seeing Gnosticism as a deviation from original, undefiled Christian belief, Bauer argued that Christianity from the start was variegated and credits Eusebius for giving us a homogenized picture of Christian beginnings.

a view in the Church Fathers, who “themselves complained not so much that the Gnostic heretics rejected the OT but that they interpreted it incorrectly.”⁴⁴ The approach today is to evaluate the texts on their own merit.⁴⁵ To this, I would add the recent observation of Michael Williams that interpretations often deal with historically difficult passages, and that in dealing with those tricky passages, the conclusions may not be antagonistic to the scriptures, just different from the explanations to which we have grown accustomed.⁴⁶ For this reason, when exploring the interpretations of Nag Hammadi texts, other interpretations contemporary to those works are essential for an adequate grasp of how exactly they view the Jewish scriptures.

Staking a Claim in the Debate: Assumptions and a Few Informed Decisions Underlying this Study

To be clear, I do not attempt in this dissertation to unravel the origins of the Gnostic phenomenon. All the extant versions of the *Apocryphon of John* are Christian documents. They are written under a Christian pseudonym, use Christian motifs, and have been substantially influenced by Christian scriptures (both older⁴⁷ and more

⁴⁴ Pearson, “Mikra,” 635. Pearson cites Hans von Campenhausen (*The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J.A. Baker [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972]) as support. It is clear that some early Christians did find the Jewish scriptures problematic (Marcion obviously comes to mind). We also get direct evidence of this critical attitude in Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora* (apud Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33.3-7), in which he describes two types of people: those who think God the Father wrote the “Law” (i.e., the Jewish scriptures) and those who think the Devil is the author. For Ptolemy, both are mistaken, for the Jewish scriptures contain both truth and error, and Jesus is the hermeneutical key.

⁴⁵ For a sampling of modern treatments, see Dahl, “Lewd Sophia”; Gruenwald, “Aspects of the Jewish Gnostic Controversy”; Logan, *The Gnostics*, 57-75; Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions*; Pearson, “Mikra”; Karl Wolfgang-Tröger, ed., *Altes Testament—Frühdudentum—Gnosis: Neue Studien zu ‘Gnosis und Bibel.’* Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1980.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁷ E.g., the LXX. Though Jews first translated their scriptures into Greek for their own use, by the second century CE, the LXX had become a Christian text, with Jews preferring other translations, such as

recent⁴⁸). I understand *Ap. John* to have been thoroughly Christian by the middle of the second century CE.⁴⁹ The analysis offered in this dissertation, then, is concerned with the development of a heterodox Christian text and its community from approximately 150 to 250 CE.

These parameters are not without their own problems. For one, the manuscripts that I am working with are all dated to the fourth century and later.⁵⁰ Moreover, the texts all come to us as translations, in some cases fairly poor ones.⁵¹ And as will be seen, in the case of the *Apocryphon*, the textual prehistory of the manuscripts is somewhat

that of Aquila. For further, see Martin Hengel, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture: Its Prehistory and the Problem of Its Canon*, trans. Mark Biddle (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

⁴⁸ E.g., letters of Paul, the Gospel of John.

⁴⁹ Again, whether the text was originally Christian or Jewish is outside of the scope of my argument. In other words, whether or not *Ap. John* (or any of the Nag Hammadi texts, for that matter) was Christian from the start or “Christianized” at some point in its textual history, I believe that it reflected Christian ideas and was used by Christian groups by the mid to late second century CE.

⁵⁰ We run into a similar problem with NT textual criticism. While we can confidently recreate the text of the NT back to the late third/early fourth century CE, prior to that point all we can make are educated guesses. Moreover, all the evidence suggests that the earliest copies of NT texts are the most varied. What we are left with is a reconstructed text that in unknown ways both reflects and does not reflect what preceded it. For further, see Eldon Jay Epp, “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text’ in New Testament Textual Criticism,” *HTR* 92 (1999), 245-81.

⁵¹ An excellent case in point is NHC VI, 5, a copy of Plato’s *Republic* 588b-589b. The translation is so muddled that the initial attempts at identification of the text, including the *editio princeps*, were quite off the mark. See James Brashler, “Plato Republic, 588b-589b: VI,5:48,16-15,23,” in *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4*, ed. Douglas M. Parrott (NHS 11; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 325-39, esp. 325-26. Brashler calls the translation “a disastrous failure” and describes it as “hopelessly confused” (325). Even if we allow that at least some of the changes are intentionally “gnosticizing” (and the passage as translated does have many interesting connections to the *Apocryphon*), we still have to acknowledge that the translation was so convoluted that it took years just to identify the text. In short, we only know of the changes made to the text because we have other external witnesses to it. What makes the whole enterprise difficult is the fact that many of the Nag Hammadi treatises survive in only one copy with no external witnesses. It is thus hard to know just how many of the translations of the texts are as confused and/or doctored as that of Plato.

complex.⁵² These three factors (late date, poor handling, and complicated prehistory) give reason for pause.⁵³ In light of these difficulties, this study is, in the words of Erich Gruen, “at best a suggestive proposal rather than a confident assertion.”⁵⁴

That said, certain features of the preservation of the *Apocryphon of John* do make the text easier to examine with than other works found at Nag Hammadi. First, four copies are extant, allowing for a comparison and perhaps also tentative reconstructions.⁵⁵ That these four manuscripts are translations of at least two and probably three different Greek exemplars gives us some confidence in our ability to reconstruct the text. Second, we know that at least the first third of the *Apocryphon* was in circulation by the time the Irenaeus wrote his *Adversus Haereses*. Many of the other ideas depicted in *Ap. John* were also current. The portion that Irenaeus quotes resembles the *Apocryphon* closely enough

⁵² The Gnostic penchant for rewriting presents several problems, especially if we hope to know the content of texts written around two centuries before the copies that are extant. On this, see Louis Painchaud, “La classification des textes de Nag Hammadi et le phénomène des réécritures,” in *Le textes de Nag Hammadi et le problème de leur classification*, ed. Louis Painchaud and Anne Pasquier (BCNH, Section “Études” 3; Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1995), 51-86. The findings of this study are assumed in a later article, Louis Painchaud and Timothy Janz, “The ‘Kingless Generation’ and the Polemical Rewriting of Certain Nag Hammadi Texts,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years*, 439-60.

⁵³ David Brakke, historian of Late Antiquity, expresses this sentiment when he wonders how the editing and study of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts found their way into the New Testament guild. See “The Early Church in North America: Late Antiquity, Theory, and the History of Christianity,” *CH* 71 (2002): 473-91, esp. 475.

⁵⁴ Erich Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 136. In this passage, Gruen is speaking of the difficulty in recognizing ancient humor, but his caution strikes me as appropriate for our quest to understand an equally elusive idea, namely, religion. Gruen’s full quote is thus worth repeating: “The equation of one’s own reaction with an author’s intention is fraught with hazard, at best a suggestive proposal rather than a confident assertion—especially when dealing with a society and culture of so distant an era. The present reader’s perspective inescapably shapes, perhaps misshapes, understanding of the texts.”

⁵⁵ See Frederik Wisse, “After the *Synopsis*: Prospects and Problems in Establishing a Critical Text of the Apocryphon of John and in Defining its Historical Location,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years*, 138-53. See also the response from Michael Williams in the same volume: “Response to the Papers of Karen King, Frederik Wisse, Michael Waldstein, and Sergio La Porta,” 208-20, here 213-15.

for us to identify it confidently as his source. In other words, our second century evidence of the *Apocryphon* closely approximates our fourth century evidence, again giving us some confidence of the shape of the text through the two centuries that separate our sources.⁵⁶

As to the issue of classification, in spite of the well-founded concerns of Karen King and, to a lesser extent, Michael Williams, in this dissertation I continue to use the conventional designations of “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism,” recognizing that the terms carry certain unintended connotations.⁵⁷ I have yet to see a plausible alternative (“biblical-demiurgical” simply will not do⁵⁸), and the categories do serve as convenient shorthand for an ancient Christian movement. Moreover, Bentley Layton has made a reasonable case that certain groups did in fact identify themselves as Gnostic, and that those groups used texts such as the *Apocryphon of John*.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Note, however, that differences remain, and those differences are the fodder for this dissertation.

⁵⁷ Note that although I use the terms “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism” provisionally, from this point on I will not place quotation marks around them.

⁵⁸ This, of course, is Michael Williams’ solution to the problem (and I have been told that he is not satisfied with the proposal either). See *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 51-53 and *passim*.

⁵⁹ Bentley Layton, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 334-50. On the ancient self-designation γνῶστικός, see esp. pp. 335-39. Birger Pearson, too, argues convincingly for continuing to use the categories. See Pearson, “Gnosticism as a Religion,” 201-23.

In the literature, the group that used the *Apocryphon* and related texts is often referred to as “Sethian,” particularly in Germany and North America. I am increasingly uncomfortable with this identification for many of the reasons that others shy away from the terms Gnostic and Gnosticism. On the one hand, the term does direct attention to a constellation of ideas and texts that are distinctive. In other words, “Sethian” can be useful shorthand to refer to a group of texts that more or less share the cosmology and theology of *Ap. John*. On the other hand, we have really very little evidence for any historical “Sethian” group, and the constellation of ideas that typically fall under the rubric of “Sethianism” serve rather to distort the ideas contained in any given “Sethian” text (on this last point see Frederik Wisse, “Stalking Those Elusive Sethians,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 563-76.). For these reasons, in

The other side of the coin likewise presents certain problems. The work of Walter Bauer, in spite of some of the shortcomings, effectively demonstrates the variety of Christianity in late antiquity.⁶⁰ How then are we to speak of that breed of Christianity that would later become dominant (orthodox/Catholic), itself evolving as it developed into the dominant expression?⁶¹ Some early church historians prefer to speak of the “Great Church.”⁶² The obvious problem with this identification is that in the second and third centuries, it is not clear that what would later become orthodox Christianity was especially dominant or “Great.”⁶³ The “Great Church” would not be established until the late third or early fourth century. Another possible solution is to speak of “proto-

general I follow Bentley Layton and use the phrase “Classic Gnostic” (without the quotes) to refer to those texts that more or less cohere with the *Apocryphon*.

⁶⁰ This, of course is the main thesis of his *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. An early helpful review, recently translated by Thomas Scheck, is that of Walther Völker, published in *JECS* 14 (2006): 399-405.

⁶¹ The clearest examples of this are Tertullian and Origen, both of whom took up the banner of orthodoxy and were later condemned as a schismatic and a heretic, respectively. Even more “orthodox” Church Fathers, such as Ignatius and Irenaeus, who defended the cause of “true” Christianity, in many ways are quite distinct in their thinking from later orthodoxy. This is especially clear, for example, in the millennialism championed by Irenaeus.

⁶² This is particularly common in Southern European scholarship.

⁶³ Take, for example, Marcion. His ideas were so popular that in just a decade after his expulsion from the church at Rome, Marcionites could be found all across the Roman Empire. Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 26 and 58, tells us that Marcion’s ideas had already by his time (150s CE) spread to all provinces. Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 5.19, reports that “Marcion’s heretical tradition filled the whole world.” My attention was drawn to these sources by Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser, ed. Marshall Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 250-51. Lampe argues Marcion’s vocation as a *naukleros* inevitably aided the rapid dissemination of his ideas (252). Marcion’s views were so well received that many scholars suggest that perhaps Marcionites outnumbered non-Marcionites in the 160s and 170s CE (on this, see John Clabeaux, “Marcion,” in *ABD* IV:514-16).

orthodoxy.”⁶⁴ However, in addition to being a particularly unwieldy turn of phrase, this identification strikes me as somewhat inaccurate inasmuch as the heresiologists were concerned more with the unity of the church (under their leadership, of course) than with right doctrine.⁶⁵ A final option is that proposed by April DeConick who prefers the identification of “apostolic Christians.”⁶⁶ This designation works with certain texts wherein the dispute is clearly between those who find the apostles authoritative and those who do not.⁶⁷ However, the disagreement is not always about apostolic authority, and in *Ap. John*, the Apostle John is claimed as the authority of this alternative vision of Christianity.⁶⁸

In light of all the aforementioned difficulties, in this study I have chosen to identify the group of Christians that would later become dominant as “early catholic.” This label is suggestive of the fact that ancient authors such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and more or less likeminded others represent a still evolving form of Christianity (thus early) that emphasized unity under a single bishop (thus catholic⁶⁹).

⁶⁴ So far as I can tell, Bart Ehrman coined the phrase. See Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶⁵ On this idea, see esp. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

⁶⁶ See, e.g., April DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

⁶⁷ The perfect example is the *Gospel of Judas*, on which Prof. DeConick has written extensively.

⁶⁸ Such is the case in many texts from Nag Hammadi: Peter, James, John, Philip, and Thomas each have at least one text written under their authority. Paul and Mary, too, are authorities in certain texts.

⁶⁹ Note also the use of the small “c.”

The *Apocryphon of John*

Although the present study does not aim to solve the thorny dilemmas outlined in the previous section, the *Apocryphon of John* is an essential text for understanding ancient Gnostic tendencies.⁷⁰ Several features of the work and its preservation suggest that the *Apocryphon* was a key text for Gnostic communities.⁷¹ In the first place, four copies of the text survive, more than any other Gnostic text.⁷² While it could be argued that this is simply due to the vagaries of history, the fact that so many copies survived may indicate the popularity that *Ap. John* enjoyed in antiquity. Second, and perhaps more significant, three of the four copies occupy the first position in the codices in which they were found.⁷³ Again, this primary position may be evidence of the work's

⁷⁰ For similar arguments to what follows, see Layton, "Prolegomena," 334-50; Alastair Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: A Study in the History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), xvii-xviii; Pearson, "The Problem of 'Jewish Gnostic' Literature," 19; Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism*, 69; Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 8.

⁷¹ Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques*, 26, calls *Ap. John* "la Bible gnostique par excellence." Perhaps reflective of this text's importance is the fact that esteemed Gnostic scholar Bentley Layton's reconstruction of the Gnostic movement is essentially based on *Ap. John*. See his "Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism," esp. points 18-22, and *Gnostic Scriptures*, 5-22.

⁷² We have two copies of a few other texts including the following: *Gos. Eg.* (NHC III,2, and IV,2), *Gos. Thom.* (NHC II,2 and P.Oxy. 1, 654, 655), *Gos. Truth* (NHC I,3 and XII,2), *Orig. World* (NHC II,5 and XIII,2), and *Soph. Jes. Chr.* (NHC III,4 and BG,3). The recently published Codex Tchacos contains copies of *Ep. Pet. Phil.* (CT,1 and NHC VIII,2) and *I Apoc. James* (CT,2 and NHC V,3); more attention has been directed towards the intriguing *Gospel of Judas* (CT,3) also contained therein.

⁷³ In each of the Nag Hammadi Codices that contain it (NHC II, III, and IV), *Ap. John* is the first text. *Ap. John* is second only in the Berlin Codex (BG 8502), where it follows *Gos. Mary*. There is also reason to believe that a fifth copy of *Ap. John* opened NHC XIII. All that survives of NHC XIII is eight leaves, thus 16 pages. The codicological analysis of John Turner ("Introduction to Codex XIII," in *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, ed. Charles Hedrick [NHS 28; Leiden: Brill, 1990], 359-69, here 360-61) suggests that 34 pages that are now lost preceded the eight extant leaves. *Ap. John* in NHC II takes up 32 pages. Given that the hand of the scribe of NHC XIII is quite similar to that of NHC II and that the former codex is "slightly smaller" than the latter (Turner, "Introduction," 359), it is possible that the 34 missing pages contained *Ap. John*. This is the conclusion of Yvonne Janssens, *La prôtennoia trimorphe (NH XIII, I)*, ed. Eadem (BCNH, Section "Textes," 4; Québec: Les presses de l'Université Laval, 1978), 2. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 248-49, appears to agree with this assessment.

importance to Gnostics.⁷⁴ Third, the cosmogony and theology of *Ap. John* bear striking similarity to several other texts discovered at Nag Hammadi, nearly all of which appear to be secondary to the *Apocryphon*.⁷⁵ Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, when Irenaeus sets out to describe the beliefs of the so-called Barbelo-Gnostics,⁷⁶ he quotes extensively from the first section of the *Apocryphon*. This again is suggestive of the relative importance of the text to Gnostic groups.

In spite of the *Apocryphon*'s apparent influence on ancient Gnostic thinking, it is worth noting that the Gnostic imagination was quite individualistic and particularly fecund. As Hans Jonas writes,

The leading Gnostics displayed pronounced intellectual individualism, and the mythological imagination of the whole movement was incessantly fertile. Non-conformism was almost a principle of the gnostic mind and was closely connected with the doctrine of the sovereign "spirit" as a source of direct knowledge and illumination. Already Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* I.18.1) observed that "Everyday one of them invents something new."⁷⁷

This variety of expressions leads Frederik Wisse to doubt whether we can identify any particular sect behind a given text. Rather, Wisse suggests that the "gnostic [*sic*] tractates in question must not be seen as the teaching of a sect or sects, but as the inspired

⁷⁴ Since *Ap. John* nearly always occupies a primary position, it has been suggested that the text functioned as a sort of "Old Testament" to certain Gnostic groups. See, e.g., Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 249-62.

⁷⁵ According to John Turner ("The Sethian School of Gnostic Thought," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer [New York: HarperOne, 2007], 784-89, here 785), the following texts are all closely related to *Ap. John*: *Hyp. Arch.*, *Gos. Eg.*, *Apoc. Adam*, *Steles Seth*, *Zost.*, *Melch.*, *Norea*, *Marsanes*, *Allogenes*, *Trim. Prot.*, the untitled text from the Bruce Codex, *Gos. Jud.*, and the *Book of Allogenes* from the Codex Tchacos. See also Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 60-97. The exact relationship between *Ap. John* and *Apoc. Adam* and *Gos. Eg.* is debatable.

⁷⁶ See *Adv. haer.* 1.29.

⁷⁷ Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 42.

creations of individuals who did not feel bound by the opinions of a religious community.”⁷⁸ This is all to say that although it appears that the *Apocryphon* held a privileged position in ancient Gnostic communities, caution is recommended before one extrapolates too much from a single text.⁷⁹ This dissertation then is primarily interested in the *Apocryphon of John* and only secondarily in what it may mean for the broader Gnostic phenomenon.

*The Apocryphon of John and Scripture:
The Status Quaestionis*

This dissertation explores the *Apocryphon* through its treatment of the Jewish scriptures. As noted above, the treatment of the Jewish scriptures in Gnostic texts is a common entry point. Because the *Apocryphon* is so saturated with direct and indirect biblical references it is a prime candidate for such an approach.

Søren Giversen⁸⁰

In 1963, Søren Giversen offered one of the earliest sustained treatments of the use

⁷⁸ Wisse, “Stalking,” 575.

⁷⁹ Conversely, emphasis on the individual in Gnostic movements must also be moderated. It is clear that communities of some form used these texts. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 9-12, notes four features of Gnostic texts that suggest communal usage: 1) A “complex and distinctive myth of origins” that 2) “expresses a strong sense of group identity,” 3) uses “special jargon or in-group language,” and 4) refers to certain rituals, such as baptism and unction. Each of these features is true of *Ap. John*.

⁸⁰ Søren Giversen, “The *Apocryphon of John* and Genesis,” *Studia Theologica* 17 (1963): 60-76. See also his important commentary, *Apocryphon Johannis: The Coptic Text of the Apocryphon Johannis in the Nag Hammadi Codex II with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary* (Acta Theologica Danica 5; Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963). Birger Pearson (“*Apocryphon Johannis* Revisited,” in *Apocryphon Severini, Presented to Søren Giversen*, ed. P. Bilde, H.K. Nielsen, and J.P. Sørensen [Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993], 155-65) offers a helpful summary and review of Giversen’s contributions to scholarship on *Ap. John*.

of scripture in the *Apocryphon of John*.⁸¹ As the title of his article indicates (“The *Apocryphon of John* and Genesis”), Giversen narrows his focus to the use of Genesis in the *Apocryphon*. The article is primarily descriptive, demonstrating the four ways in which the *Apocryphon* interacts with Genesis and offering a brief discussion of the operative hermeneutics. Giversen’s discussion is helpful on many fronts, and his conclusion that *Ap. John* uses the text of Genesis to offer instruction and insight to the initiated (in other words, the *Apocryphon* does not reject scripture outright) is certainly justifiable. Although his argument is a helpful corrective to earlier scholarship that assumed Gnostic hermeneutics involved a sweeping rejection of scripture, the article does not adequately account for the true disagreement that exists in the document. This may be on account of Giversen’s (deliberate?) inattention to the development of the document.⁸² These criticisms aside, Giversen offers a nuanced presentation of the evidence and is a valuable dialogue partner to this study.

Michel Tardieu⁸³

Michel Tardieu has written one of the major commentaries on the *Apocryphon of John*. Tardieu’s understanding of the *Apocryphon*’s treatment of scripture is closely related to his reconstruction of the development of the text that will be spelled out in more detail in the section below. At present, suffice it to say that Tardieu posits that the *Apocryphon*’s engagement with the Jewish scriptures is uneven through the text’s

⁸¹ Pearson, “*Apocryphon Johannis* Revisited,” 155, reports that only one article on *Ap. John* predates the work of Giversen, that of Walter Till (“The Gnostic Apocryphon of John,” *JEH* 3 [1952]: 14-22).

⁸² See a similar critique in Pearson, “*Apocryphon Johannis* Revisited,” 161-62.

⁸³ Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques*.

development. Perhaps most significantly for our purposes, Tardieu argues that the *Apocryphon*'s use of the biblical text at its various stages is suggestive of its relationship to the other Christian movements. Tardieu's commentary will be an important voice in this dissertation.

Birger Pearson⁸⁴

Birger Pearson has written many articles that discuss *Ap. John* as a part of a larger argument, though few specifically examine the text in its own right. As noted above, Pearson's articles are often attempts to demonstrate the Jewish background and thus also the fundamentally Jewish origins of Gnosticism. As such, his main emphasis, especially in his discussions of the *Apocryphon*, is on the prehistory of the text. Pearson understands the base text of *Ap. John* to be akin to other pseudepigraphal writings that fall under the rubric of "rewritten scripture."⁸⁵ For Pearson, the bulk of the middle portion of the *Apocryphon* is essentially a Gnostic rewriting of Genesis 1-7, similar to other Jewish rewritings of scripture (such as *I Enoch*, *Jubilees*, and the *Genesis Apocryphon* from Qumran). In this way, in the *Apocryphon of John*, "The biblical text is not rejected out of hand; it is corrected and amplified by the composition of a superior

⁸⁴ I will mention here just a few articles that I have found especially helpful. See esp. Birger Pearson, "Jewish Sources in Gnostic Literature," in *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple*, ed. Michael Stone (CRINT 2.2; Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 443-81; Idem, "The Problem of 'Jewish Gnostic' Literature," in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, 15-35; Idem, "Use, Authority and Exegesis of Mikra in Gnostic Literature," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, 635-52. For a full listing of Pearson's works, many of which are relevant to the questions at hand, see the bibliography.

⁸⁵ See esp. Pearson, "Mikra," 647-52. The problems with this category have led to a few recent articles (see, e.g., James Bowley and John Reeves, "Rethinking the Concept of 'Bible': Some Theses and Proposals," published online www.uncc.edu/jcreeves/bowley-reeves.pdf) and the creation of a section in 2006 at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, "Rethinking the Concept and Categories of 'Bible' in Antiquity."

version of the truth.”⁸⁶ Along with many other scholars,⁸⁷ I agree with this assessment. That said, in addition to Pearson’s method raising the issues noted in the discussion of the origins of Gnosticism,⁸⁸ his treatment of the *Apocryphon* is also lacking any interpretation of the document as it now stands. He only interprets the putative *Urtext*, and, if he is right about the history of the text of the *Apocryphon*, the text has undergone significant changes since its initial rewriting of Genesis.⁸⁹

Louis Painchaud⁹⁰

In a 1996 article, Louis Painchaud, following an earlier statement by R. McL. Wilson,⁹¹ suggests that scholars had not yet begun to mine the depths of the influence of the Jewish scriptures on Gnostic texts. He argues that although formal and direct quotations shed some light on Gnostic interaction with scripture, our understanding of that relationship has been hindered by the lack of attention to allusions in Gnostic writings. Given the inherent difficulty in identifying biblical allusions, Painchaud puts forth three criteria: 1) the strangeness or peculiarity of the wording in the context; 2) the ability of the suggested scriptural allusion to elucidate the passage; and 3) the presence in

⁸⁶ Pearson, “Mikra,” 649.

⁸⁷ See, e.g., Giversen, “The *Apocryphon of John* and Genesis”; Logan, *The Gnostics*, 57-75.

⁸⁸ See above, p. 9

⁸⁹ In spite of this criticism, I find Pearson helpful in his use of Jewish interpretive traditions to elucidate the *Apocryphon*’s treatment of scripture, including Alexandrian traditions such as those that we find in the works of Philo. To be sure, this approach is widespread. I find Pearson’s distillations to be particularly helpful and will refer to him often in future chapters.

⁹⁰ Louis Painchaud, “The Use of Scripture in Gnostic Literature,” *J ECS* 4 (1996): 129-47.

⁹¹ Robert McL. Wilson, “The Gnostics and the Old Testament,” in *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism. Stockholm, August 20–25, 1973*, ed. G. Widengren (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1977), 164–68, esp. 167.

some cases of other biblical quotes or allusions in the passage. Painchaud then applies those criteria to *Ap. John* and *Orig. World*. His study is brief and meant only to open up new avenues of research but offers helpful guidance in addressing the question at hand.

Gerard Luttikhuizen⁹²

Gerard Luttikhuizen's recently published collection of essays posits that *Ap. John* represents an intra-Christian debate about the use of the OT. He argues that much like Ptolemy in his *Epistle to Flora*, Marcion in his canon, and the author of *Epistle of Barnabas*, the author of the *Apocryphon* is a Christian writer weighing in on the appropriate use of scripture. In this way, Luttikhuizen offers a unique perspective on many of the issues addressed in this study.

"Diachronic" Analyses of the Apocryphon of John

The four extant manuscripts of the *Apocryphon of John* represent at least two distinct versions.⁹³ Each of the manuscripts is a Coptic translation of a Greek original. A fifth copy of roughly the first third of *Ap. John* is available to us in the Latin translation of Irenaeus of Lyons' *Against Heresies*.⁹⁴ It is because multiple copies of *Ap. John*

⁹² Luttikhuizen's impressive bibliography on this topic is available in his *Festschrift* edited by Anthony Hilhorst and George H. van Kooten, *The Wisdom of Egypt: Jewish, Early Christian, and Gnostic Essays in Honour of Gerard P. Luttikhuizen* (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 537-543. Several of his articles especially pertinent to the topic at hand are available in Luttikhuizen, *Gnostic Revisions*.

⁹³ The Nag Hammadi Cache yielded three copies of *Ap. John*: II,1; III,1; and IV,1, each dated to ca. 350 CE. Papyrus Berolinensis 8502,2 (BG) is the fourth copy, dated to the early 5th century CE. The versions contained in NHC II and IV are closely related, differing only on account of minor variant readings, scribal errors, and variant spellings. NHC III and BG represent a significantly shorter version. The differences between NHC III and BG are likely due to independent translation (though some suggest that they are in fact distinct recensions). See Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, eds., *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2* (NHMS 33; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1-5.

⁹⁴ *Adv. haer.* 1.29.

survive that a diachronic analysis is possible. As a general rule, it can be assumed that the long version, represented by NHC II and IV, is most likely a redaction of some form of the short version, represented by NHC III and BG.⁹⁵ This redaction took place before the translation of the Greek originals into Coptic. Irenaeus may very well have preserved the earliest version; the section he presents may have not yet been joined to the other parts of the *Apocryphon*.⁹⁶ In addition to several major additions found in the long version, other minor variations pervade the four manuscripts. While many of the changes are insignificant (due to choices in translation, inadvertent scribal errors, etc.), several offer a glimpse into the development of the text and the communities that found it inspired. What follows is a brief review of significant authors whose works explore how *Ap. John* evolved through time and between communities.

Søren Giversen⁹⁷

Søren Giversen's line-by-line study of the *Apocryphon of John* in NHC II includes close examinations of the differences between the longer and the shorter

⁹⁵ Waldstein and Wisse, *Synopsis*, 7. They assert,

There can be little doubt about the relationship between the longer and the shorter versions of the AJ. The differences only find a satisfactory explanation if the longer version is a redaction of the shorter. There is no reason to believe that the redactor of the longer version started with anything other than the form of AJ preserved in codices III and BG... In the absence of evidence to the contrary it is best to assume that the redaction of the longer version was done by one person at one time and in one place.

I am not convinced that in every variant the shorter version represents the more original reading. The relationship between the various versions of *Ap. John* appears to be far more complicated than a simple move from one to the other.

⁹⁶ Irenaeus does not betray any awareness of the rest of the text of the *Apocryphon*. The section that immediately follows 1.29 is a collection of Gnostic ideas, some loosely related to *Ap. John*, but none of its narrative remains intact. Irenaeus also appears to be unaware of the text's supposed connection to the apostle John, an issue that will be addressed in chapter four.

⁹⁷ Giversen, *Apocryphon Johannis*.

versions. As an appendix to his analysis, Giversen spells out his understanding of the relationship between the various versions.⁹⁸ He argues that, in general,⁹⁹ the longer version was more original than the shorter, the latter being an abridgment of the former. Curiously, although Giversen can find no reasons for the abridgment (they are simply “editorial,” identified primarily by aporia),¹⁰⁰ he does find editorial tendencies in the longer version, namely an emphasis on the “sublime” and a discomfort with anthropomorphisms.¹⁰¹ It should be noted that although the exact relationship between the two versions is still debated, his understanding of the relationship between the versions is now the minority opinion.¹⁰²

Michel Tardieu¹⁰³

Michel Tardieu offers his understanding of the relationship between the various versions in his important commentary on the Berlin Codex. His reconstruction of the prehistory of *Ap. John* involves several stages. The first stage (n) closely resembles the shorter version, lacking various poetic elements (such as the final Pronoia monologue), the excerpt from the Book of Zoroaster, and certain biblical features. The second stage (n¹) added the Pronoia monologue, the *melothesia* section, certain biblical features, and is

⁹⁸ For what follows, see Giversen, *Apocryphon Johannis*, 276-82.

⁹⁹ Giversen’s nuance is noteworthy. He writes, “[W]e generally cannot regard any one of the texts as the original version... the evidence must be evaluated in individual places” (*Apocryphon Johannis*, 277).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 279.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 278, 280.

¹⁰² See Pearson, “*Apocryphon Johannis* Revisited,” 158.

¹⁰³ Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques*, esp. 40-47.

informed by the Gospel of John. From this stage, the document branched off in two directions: o and n². O forms the basis of the shorter version. It omits the *melothesia* section and Pronoia monologue and inserts a brief explanatory parenthesis at BG 26,1-6 to clarify that the highest god is incomprehensible. The longer version is dependent upon n², which maintains the omitted sections and works to harmonize the text, both within itself as well as with other Christian texts. This harmonizing tendency (Tardieu goes so far as to call it “catholicisation”¹⁰⁴) has the effect of making this stage of the *Apocryphon* less subversive.

Tardieu’s reconstruction is illuminating and it deeply informs the argument of this dissertation. His observation that the shifts in the longer version serve to mitigate some of the vitriol is particularly incisive. Likewise, his reconstruction accounts for the fact that, paradoxically, the two longer insertions (the *melothesia* section and the Pronoia monologue) appear to be on the one hand insertions in the longer version yet on the other hand somehow excised from the shorter version. Tardieu’s proposed prehistory will be revisited in chapter four.

Birger Pearson¹⁰⁵

Birger Pearson’s strong advocacy for the Jewish origins of Gnosticism has necessarily led him to several diachronic analyses of many Gnostic texts. Because nearly all the extant texts (indeed, some would argue *all* of them¹⁰⁶) survive only in a

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰⁵ See n. 84 above.

¹⁰⁶ E.g., Alastair Logan, to be discussed below.

Christianized form, Pearson must peel away the Christian layers to find the Jewish-Gnostic *Urtext*. This is his strategy with *Ap. John*.¹⁰⁷ Pearson contends that if one were to remove the apocalyptic framework and the ten questions asked by John, “one is left with material in which nothing basically ‘Christian’ remains, except for some easily removed glosses.”¹⁰⁸

Pearson, then, is concerned with locating the earliest form of the text and the later accretions. The present study finds many of his observations beneficial, especially his identification of the various compositional units and glosses. This dissertation, however, differs in aim and in some cases analysis. In the first place, since I seek to describe the development of the text once the various units were more or less in place, I am more concerned with minor variations and glosses than seismic shifts. Second, and relatedly, I do not wish to use the various redactions to demonstrate the Jewish (or any other)

¹⁰⁷ Pearson thinks that rewriting Jewish texts with Christian flourishes was a common practice of Christian Gnostics. He cites the Christianization of *Eugnostos* into the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* as key evidence. See e.g., “Jewish Sources,” 461; “Mikra,” 649. For a similar view of the relationship between *Eugnostos* and *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, see also PHEME PERKINS, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 94-98.

The composite nature of the *Apocryphon of John* is apparent in the relatively distinct units that can be excised from the larger work without doing too much damage to the thrust of the text (e.g., the apocalyptic framework, the ten questions asked by John, the melothesia section, the Pronoia monologue). We can see how various units would be added or incorporated in the extant texts themselves.

In my opinion some caution is necessary in the discussion of the composite features of the text. While we may be able to discern the various components, it does not necessarily follow that the various parts represent different stages in the development of the text. It could be that the various parts were composed at the same time, or at least brought together out of disparate works by one author. For example, just because the apocalyptic bookends that set the stage for John to receive the revelation are distinct generically, this does not mean that they are late additions. The canonical book of Revelation is an excellent case in point. It too opens with an apocalyptic revelatory scene. In a relatively abrupt shift, the contents of seven letters are described. The shift in genre in this case is in no way evidence of additions. Further, in some cases, it is unclear whether a unit is an addition or a subtraction. The best example here is the Pronoia monologue at the end of the long version. Is this an addition from an outside source that the author/editor of the longer version inserted or is it already present in an earlier version and removed by the author/editor of the shorter version?

¹⁰⁸ Pearson, “Jewish Sources,” 461.

background of the *Apocryphon*. Instead, my aim is to explore how the shifts and glosses reveal intra-Christian debates.

John Turner¹⁰⁹

Like Birger Pearson, John Turner is primarily concerned with the development of the larger Gnostic movement. Turner set out in his ambitious project to trace the development of “Sethian” Gnosticism and its relationship to concurrent developments in Platonism. He has identified five distinct stages of development: 1) a pre-Christian baptismal sect of the first centuries BCE and CE; 2) becoming a gradually Christianized movement in the late first century CE; 3) in conflict with early catholic Christians in the late second century CE; 4) rejected by the Great Church and increasingly Platonic in the third century; and 5) estranged from Platonists and increasingly fragmented into various sectarian groups in the late third century CE into the Middle Ages.¹¹⁰ Because Turner is working with texts commonly identified as “Sethian,” he necessarily includes *Ap. John*. While the first two stages are largely unrelated to this dissertation, stages three and four are of particular interest, especially when unintentional intersections between Turner’s work and my own mutually confirm conclusions.

Karen King¹¹¹

This dissertation was initially inspired by Karen King. Shortly after the publication of Waldstein and Wisse’s synopsis of *Ap. John*, King cautioned against using

¹⁰⁹ Turner, “Sethian Gnosticism: A Literary History,” 55-86; idem, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition*.

¹¹⁰ Summary adapted from Turner, “Literary History,” 56.

¹¹¹ Karen King, “Approaching the Variants of the *Apocryphon of John*,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years*, 105-137.

the synopsis solely for the purpose of constructing an “original” text.¹¹² King suggests, “Rather than see the tendencies of a version as the distortion of the hypothetical ‘original,’ tendencies can be analyzed as evidence of the meaning and practices (the social and intellectual history) of the audiences who knew the *Apocryphon of John*.”¹¹³ Following King, I aim to study the social and intellectual history of the community through a diachronic analysis of the use of scripture in *Ap. John*. Although I am most concerned with studying the variants and listening carefully to the unique voice of each, this does not (and cannot) mean that the quest for a hypothetical “original” is abandoned. Indeed, it cannot be. As Michael Williams rightly notes in a response to King’s argument, “[H]ow are we to have a ‘social history’ of a work like *Apocryphon of John* if we do not make *attempts* at discriminating layers and *orders* of layers?”¹¹⁴ In other words, there has to be at least some sense of the direction of the changes to grasp fully why those changes were made. A simple narrative reading of the two versions side by side will not provide sufficient heuristic force.

Alastair H. B. Logan¹¹⁵

Alastair Logan has offered the most comprehensive study of the development of the *Apocryphon of John* to date. His aim is to trace the evolution of Gnostic thought and

¹¹² Ibid., 130-37. Curiously, King’s recent book, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), does not deal much with the variants. This is unfortunate as I am quite curious as to how she would understand the “social and intellectual history” of the group(s) responsible for *Ap. John*. In a personal conversation at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, she informed me that she had no intention of pursuing this line of thought further.

¹¹³ Ibid., 132. Williams “Response,” 208-20, offers several helpful nuances to King’s suggestion. For the moment, the most significant is his observation that not all changes are hermeneutically significant. Some changes may be stylistic and some may be mistakes (212-13).

¹¹⁴ Williams, “Response,” 211.

in so doing to demonstrate the fundamentally Christian character of the movement. His primary object of study is the *Apocryphon of John*, as he sees this text as the foundational distillation of Gnostic beliefs and practices. Although the question of origins does not concern us here, Logan's detailed reconstruction of the development of *Ap. John* is an essential resource.

Logan identifies four hypothetical recensions: (a) The "original myth," including the description of the various emanations, the fall of Sophia, the reinterpretation of Gen 1-4, the origin of the counterfeit spirit, the destiny of souls and the baptismal rite involving five seals; (a¹) the version of the myth recounted in Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.29, with the elements missing from Irenaeus' account intentionally omitted by Irenaeus; (a²) under the influence of elements found in Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.30, the canonical Gospel of John, and Valentinian ideas, the apocalyptic framework, the Pronoia/Epinoia scheme, the ten questions from John, and the Pronoia monologue are added; and finally (a³) a "Sethian" reinterpretation in which the four illuminators become aeons, Seth and his seed and the immovable race are introduced, the melothesia section is added, and the reinterpretation of Gen 5-9 is added.¹¹⁶

Logan's attention to how the various traditions interact with each other, with elements being introduced and removed, is both the strength and weakness of his argument. On the one hand, his reconstruction is very carefully nuanced and accounts for

¹¹⁵ Logan, *Gnostic Truth*.

¹¹⁶ On this reconstruction, see Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 29-69. See also his helpful visual summaries on pp. 55-56.

what was certainly a complicated history. On the other hand, Logan is perhaps too confident about how exactly the development of the text transpired.¹¹⁷

Bernard Barc and Louis Painchaud¹¹⁸

The work of Bernard Barc and Louis Painchaud is the closest to what I am attempting to do in this study. Following the lead of King's 1995 paper discussed above, Barc and Painchaud set out to understand the differences between the shorter and longer versions, not to postulate a putative *Urtext*, but to explore the theological and doctrinal differences that reveal the receptions of the text in various environments.

Barc and Painchaud begin with the final Pronoia monologue found only in the longer version. Using the work of Michael Waldstein,¹¹⁹ they demonstrate how the three descents of Pronoia described in the monologue have been subtly worked into the rest of the text of the longer version. Most of the minor variants, in their opinion, can thus be attributed to this reworking.

There is much to be commended in their study. The method employed and conclusions reached are sound. They demonstrate that in many cases, especially where Pronoia in her various instantiations appears, the longer version is indeed a redaction of the shorter version. Further, they demonstrate how the minor variations in the text could be evidence of theological or doctrinal reworking. In this dissertation I follow their lead,

¹¹⁷ For a similar evaluation, see Karen King's review of the book in *JBL* 117 (1998): 166-68, esp. p. 166.

¹¹⁸ Bernard Barc and Louis Painchaud, "La réécriture de l'Apocryphon de Jean à la lumière de l'hymne final de la version longue," *Le Muséon* 112 (1999): 317-33.

¹¹⁹ Michael Waldstein, "The Providence Monologue in the *Apocryphon of John* and the Johannine Prologue," *J ECS* 3 (1995): 369-402.

seeking to understand the subtle differences in how the scriptural text is employed in the various versions.

Overview of the Argument

Aims and Thesis

In the mid- to late-second century as various types of Christianity proliferated and competed with one another, a group's relationship to the sacred text came to function as a powerful identity marker. This dynamic appears to be active in the *Apocryphon of John*. Although the authors of *Apocryphon of John* are critical of Moses, they nonetheless follow his account closely. Even at the points of explicit disagreement, several features of the "corrections" reveal continuing attention to and respect for his narrative. First, the disagreements are not substantive. The changes to Moses' account are generally minor; one can even question whether a true disagreement exists. Second, and relatedly, the versions often disagree with each other on precisely where Moses' erred. Finally, through time, it is clear that the authors were returning to the text. That is, although Moses' account is wrongheaded, it is still mined for insight. These three inconsistencies lead me to conclude that the authors of *Ap. John* explicitly maligned the early catholic scriptures not because they found them inherently misguided. Rather, their critical attitude is primarily rhetorical, drawing a clear boundary between themselves and their rivals through their "rejection" of Moses.

Chapter Summaries

The argument proceeds as follows. Chapter two outlines the ways in which the *Apocryphon* is fundamentally indebted to the Jewish scriptures. Far from rejecting the

claims of the scriptures, the *Apocryphon* closely reads and interprets the sacred text. This is evidenced in *Ap. John*'s genre, structure, and careful attention to the details of certain biblical narratives. Many of the apparent challenges to the reliability of scripture are in actuality attempts to address knotty interpretive issues that troubled other ancient exegetes. Chapter three explores how despite this general commitment to the Jewish scriptures the *Apocryphon* takes an antagonistic stance against Moses. This antagonism is evidenced in the savior's laughter and the four explicit corrections of Moses' account. Yet, in spite of the avowed opposition, even within the corrections it is clear that *Ap. John* is still committed to the Jewish scriptures and somehow finds them authoritative. Chapter four then sets out to explain this apparent tension within the *Apocryphon*: If the text finds the Jewish scriptures essential and authoritative for a proper understanding of the world and the Gnostic's place in it, why does it take an explicitly argumentative tone towards those same scriptures? The first answer, argued out in this chapter, is diachronic. In short, in the initial stages of the document, the *Apocryphon* offers an interpretation of the Bible that although alternative to other Christian interpretations was nonetheless an attempt to understand the sacred text in Gnosticizing terms. It is only after a dispute with certain leaders of what would later evolve into the Great Church that the challenges to the authority of Moses were inserted and the text took a more combative tone.

CHAPTER TWO

“INDEED HE SAID THROUGH THE PROPHET”

Introduction

In the central section of the *Apocryphon of John*’s account of the creation of the world, where the text interacts most consistently with the Bible, John asks the savior about the nature of Adam’s “trance” (drawing upon Gen 2:21).¹ The savior replies with the second of four explicit corrections of Moses, “It is not as Moses wrote and you heard. For he said in his first book, ‘He put him to sleep.’”² After correcting Moses—the trance is not a physical sleep but the placing of a spiritual veil over Adam’s perception—the savior turns to the book of the prophet Isaiah to provide proof for his interpretation: “For indeed he said through the prophet, ‘I will make their hearts heavy that they may not pay attention and may not see.’”³ In spite of the savior’s insistence that Moses (and Moses’ text in NHC II) is unreliable, the savior has not completely disregarded the biblical text. Instead he turns immediately to it to authenticate his explanation of the events. In this brief passage we see the tension that exists throughout the *Apocryphon*’s treatment of the Jewish and early Christian scriptures—they are viewed at once as both dubious (“not as

¹ See NHC II 22,20-28 and pars.

² NHC II 22,22-24. Note the difference in language from NHC III 29,4-6 and BG 58,16-18. On the bookish tendencies of NHC II, see chapter four below.

³ NHC II 22,25-28.

Moses said”) and trustworthy (“indeed he said through the prophet”) witnesses to the divine reality.⁴ This chapter explores the latter feature with an aim to demonstrate the fundamental dependence of the *Apocryphon of John* upon the scriptural text.

The *Apocryphon* and the Biblical Text: Two Common Misperceptions

In discussions of the Gnostic view of scripture even the most nuanced descriptions often fall into the pattern of describing Gnostic interpretation as either an outright rejection of the Old Testament or an intentional misreading of it.⁵ Both of these characterizations are inadequate, particularly in the case of the *Apocryphon*.⁶ The following sections briefly demonstrate the tendency in scholarship towards these descriptions and offer a critique of it.

⁴ Birger Pearson (“Some Observations on Gnostic Hermeneutics,” in *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty [Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979], 243-56, here 249) speaks of this tension when he writes, “Although this text rejects the Torah as such, the law with all of its demands, it is *curious* that the Gnostic was able to find the truth, nevertheless, in the text, by means of his own exposition of it. It is precisely the Biblical text that serves the Gnostic as his basic source of revelation.” His flat assertion that the text is rejected (which I will argue against in this chapter) is later nuanced in idem, “Use, Authority and Exegesis of Mikra in Gnostic Literature,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. M. J. Mulder (CRINT 2.1; Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 635-52.

⁵ Key studies on Gnostic hermeneutics include Giovanni Filoramo and Claudio Gianotto, “L’interpretazione gnostica dell’ Antico Testamento: Posizioni ermeneutiche e tecniche esegetiche,” *Augustinianum* 22 (1982): 53-74; Pearson, “Mikra in Gnostic Literature,” 635-52; Karl-Wolfgang Tröger, ed., *Altes Testament – Frühjudentum – Gnosis: Neue Studien zu “Gnosis und Bibel”* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1980) (in that volume, see esp. Peter Nagel, “Die Auslegung der Paradieserzählung un der Gnosis,” 49-70); Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 54-79.

⁶ It is clear that some Gnostic groups rejected the biblical text, though perhaps not as many as is generally assumed. Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora*, noted above in chapter one, n. 44, provides the clearest evidence that some Christian groups believed the biblical text to have been inspired by the Devil, thus by implication, wholly unreliable. Many of the texts from Nag Hammadi that are put forth as evidence for the rejection of the scriptures do not necessarily do so. More often, as we will see in the *Apocryphon*, the text is not rejected but taken at face value, and the god it depicts is ridiculed.

Rejection of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures

The argument that the Gnostics in general, and the author of the *Apocryphon* in particular, reject the Bible still finds traction in academic books and articles. As noted above, Adolf von Harnack's oft-cited description of Gnosticism as the "acute Hellenization of Christianity" carried with it the assertion that part of that Hellenization was a rejection of the Old Testament.⁷ Walter Bauer, too, saw the dismissal of the biblical text as a key identifying marker of Gnostic thinking.⁸ Hans Jonas' depiction of the Gnostic "spirit" or "mood" as essentially one of protest and rebellion, leads naturally to the conclusion that Gnostic attitudes towards the biblical text would naturally lead to a fairly comprehensive rejection.⁹

The problem with arguments such as these is that they do not take into account the primary evidence from the texts themselves. While some Christian groups may have abandoned and/or rejected the biblical text (the Marcionites¹⁰ most readily come to mind,

⁷ See above, chapter one, n. 43.

⁸ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 195-202; trans. of *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie, Band 10; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1934). Perhaps in one of his more creative uses of sources, Bauer argued that Ptolemy "was the first to go beyond a complete rejection of the Old Testament..." (197).

⁹ This depiction runs throughout his work. See esp. Hans Jonas, 'Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon,' in *Le Origini Dello Gnosticsimo: Colloquio di Messina, 13-18 Aprile 1966*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Studies in the History of Religion 12; Leiden: Brill, 1970), 90-108. Jonas writes on p. 102, "The same value reversal is practiced in regards to the Law, the prophets, the status of the chosen people—all along the line, one might say, with very few exceptions, such as the misty figure of Seth. No tolerant eclecticism here." For a helpful discussion of the impact of Jonas' understanding of Gnostic protest and its relationship to the biblical text, see Michael Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 54-55.

¹⁰ Marcion and the Marcionites become a true red herring in this discussion. Marcion and his followers did reject the Old Testament. And it is true Marcion and the Gnostics clearly shared some similar ideas, most notably the disdain for the god of the Old Testament. However, Marcion and his followers were clearly not Gnostics and vice-versa. They have distinct anthropologies, soteriologies, cosmogonies,

though other groups are witnessed indirectly¹¹), the evidence from Nag Hammadi and the heresiologists suggests not a wholesale rejection of scripture but a deep engagement. The Nag Hammadi texts are replete with deep biblical reflection.¹² Even those texts from Nag Hammadi that are most critical of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, such as *Treat. Seth* and *Test. Truth*, still rely on biblical interpretation to make their case.¹³ According to the heresiologists, the problem with Gnostic engagement with scripture was not so much that they disregarded it but that they misinterpreted it.¹⁴ In light of the primary sources, Hans

and, most importantly for our purposes, different attitudes towards the biblical text. As distinguished Spanish biblical scholar Antonio Orbe (“Spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas: Exegesis gnóstica de Gen. 1,2b,” *Gregorianum* 44.4 [1963]: 691-730, here 692) writes, “Eran muy raros los que desautorizaban el A.T. como Marcion.” Too often, however, scholars elide the two, particularly with regards to their treatment of the biblical text. For further, see Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 75-82, 147-65; trans. of *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 59; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1968); Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, ed. and trans. R. McL. Wilson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984), 313-16; trans. of *Die Gnosis: Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion* (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1977).

¹¹ Again, Ptolemy’s *Letter to Flora* serves as a witness here, as does Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 5.1. On the latter, see Alastair Logan, *The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 62.

¹² For a clear presentation of the breadth and depth of Gnostic interpretation of the biblical text, see R. McL. Wilson, “The Gnostics and the Old Testament,” in *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism, Stockholm August 20-25 1973*, ed. Geo Widengren (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 164-68.

¹³ Both of these texts ridicule the god of the Old Testament and his prophets repeatedly, but they are ultimately dependent upon the biblical text for their understanding of just who that god is. In other words, both texts rely heavily on the biblical account and it is the biblical account that provides fodder for their mockery of the god it represents. Many scholars take that mockery to infer a rejection of the biblical text when in actuality the text is taken as a reliable (even authoritative) witness to the god it depicts. In short, *Treat. Seth* and *Test. Truth* do not reject the text but the god found therein. One could extrapolate from this that the text loses its authority because the authors are misguided by a lesser deity, but this supposed loss of authority is not explicit in either of the texts. For a different take, see Pearson, “Mikra in Gnostic Literature,” 639-41.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 2.10.1; Tertullian, *Praescr.* 17. On this point, see Campenhausen, *Formation*, 76; Karen King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2003), 27-30; Pearson, “Mikra in Gnostic Literature,” 635; Colin Roberts, *Manuscript, Society, and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 51.

von Campenhausen is right to assert, “The view which dominated earlier scholarship, that ‘the gnosis’ had more or less rejected the Old Testament from the start, is today no longer tenable—indeed it has very nearly been reversed.”¹⁵

In spite of this general shift in scholarship, there are still some important figures in the field who maintain that the *Apocryphon of John* rejects the biblical text. A brief summary of the recent arguments of two key scholars, among the most influential voices in the field, will demonstrate the way in which this idea continues to find adherents. After a brief outline of their respective positions, the argument of Alastair Logan will be put forth as a helpful corrective.

Karen King: Deep Engagement with Scripture, but Ultimately a Rejection of It

In her 2006 book, *The Secret Revelation of John*, Karen King sets out to offer a corrective of many of the “usual stereotypes associated with Gnostic heresy.”¹⁶ Included

¹⁵ Campenhausen, *Formation*, 75-76. To illustrate his point, see, e.g., Ithamar Gruenwald, “Aspects of the Jewish-Gnostic Controversy,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28-31, 1978*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 2.713-23; idem, “Jewish Sources for the Gnostic Texts from Nag Hammadi,” in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies, held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1973*, ed. Avigdor Shinan (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977), 3.45-56; Karen King, *The Secret Book of John* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 177-90; Logan, *The Gnostics*, 61-72; Louis Painchaud, “Uses of Scripture in Gnostic Literature,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4.2 (1996): 129-47; Birger Pearson, “The Problem of Jewish Gnostic Literature,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, ed. Charles Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1986), 15-35; Riemer Roukema, *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1999), 114 n. 7; trans. from Dutch of *Gnosis en geloof in het vroege christendom. Een inleiding tot de gnostiek* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Meinema, 1998).

As to Campenhausen’s position, note the subtle phrase, “*from the start*.” Later in his discussion of the Old Testament canon (pp.76-102), he will put forth a dialectic in which the early catholics dealt with a challenge to the scriptural text from two directions. On the one hand, Marcion and his followers sought to remove certain texts (especially the Old Testament) while on the other, the Gnostics (especially the Valentinians) sought to add texts. The early catholic response was to form a clear canon. Implicit in this dialectic is a weakening of the authority of the OT from both sides—Marcionites by removing texts, Valentinians by adding new texts that were correctives of the old. In his framework, “the canonical significance of the Old Testament within gnosis is becoming problematic and, indeed, vanishing altogether...” (101). I will argue below in chapter five that, in the case of the *Apocryphon*, this dialectic does not hold true.

in this corrective is a chapter that offers a nuanced discussion of Gnostic hermeneutics.¹⁷

In that chapter she examines the *Apocryphon*'s interpretation of scripture in light of other texts contemporary to it. The struggle is not over the authority of the text, but the way in which it is interpreted.¹⁸ King argues that the authors (or, to use her language, the "framers") of *Ap. John* used "materials of considerable prestige" (including, but not limited to, the biblical text) to articulate what they perceived to be the truth about the divine realm.¹⁹

In spite of this *a priori* acceptance of the text as containing some measure of truth, King argues that, according to the savior in *Ap. John*, all of the sources (Plato, Moses, Solomon, etc.) are limited and "offer only a distorted and refracted imitation of the true Reality."²⁰ In this way, the authors of the *Apocryphon* approach the Bible from a critical

¹⁶ King, *Secret Book*, viii. Further on (p. ix) she explains that the book is an attempt to offer an "illustration of the interpretive framework [she] recommended in *What Is Gnosticism?*"

¹⁷ Ibid., 177-190. Many of the ideas expressed in that chapter have influenced my own thinking on the topic.

¹⁸ Ibid., 177-80.

¹⁹ Ibid., 180f.

²⁰ Ibid., 181. King writes, "[Those who wrote the *Apocryphon*] read a wide array of the most prestigious intellectual and literary materials of antiquity as fragments and partial perceptions, none of which contains the whole story, but all of which are at once construed as part of 'the same story.' They are not seen as we would see them today: alternative traditions from different times and cultures, but rather as the accumulated wisdom of the human race."

King later argues that this borrowing and blending of texts was widely practiced in Christian circles in early centuries of the movement. She writes on p. 182, "Christian theologians of the second and third centuries were all claiming that the Jewish scriptures, pagan practices, and Greek philosophy could be properly understood only through the hermeneutical lens of Christ. They were not only saying that God had done a new thing, but that his eternal purpose, established at creation and pursued through all of human history, became fully apparent only in Christ. So, too, the framers of the *Secret Revelation of John*." The early catholic apologists are good examples of this practice. See, e.g., Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 44 (where he asserts that Moses precedes Plato and all the other Greek writers) and *1 Apol.* 54-60 (with the claim that pagan beliefs are an imitation of Christian beliefs). Assertions such as these allow Justin to appropriate pagan ideas. This is Clement of Alexandria's basic approach in his *Stromateis* as well.

perspective that ultimately leads to a rejection (or at least a perceived rejection) of the text.²¹

In sum, for King, the Gnostics refer to the text only when it suits their purposes. The deep engagement with the biblical text is depicted as more or less cherry-picking and/or offering as proof texts those passages that fit their vision of reality while dismissing those texts that do not.²² In the end, the biblical text has more to be rejected than received, and this is the general attitude of the authors of the *Apocryphon*.

Gerard Luttikhuisen: Engagement with Scripture to Demonstrate Its Inadequacies

Gerard Luttikhuisen's 2006 book, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions*, is a collection of essays in which Luttikhuisen puts forth his understanding of Gnostic hermeneutics.²³ Although all the essays were previously published, this collection is nonetheless organized under a general thesis that summarizes Luttikhuisen's thinking on the subject.²⁴ In short, Luttikhuisen argues that the Gnostics

²¹ King, *Secret Revelation*, 220. In one particularly telling section, in which she explains the Gnostic interpretation of texts that were also problematic to Jews and Christians, she writes, "But in solving these problems the *Secret Revelation of John* offered a radical solution that appealed to few. Suggesting that the creator God was ignorant and wicked resolved the problems but offered little comfort to those who looked to Scripture as divine truth and sought to model their lives according to its teaching." The problem here is that she implies that the authors of the *Apocryphon* reject the idea that the scriptural text holds divine truth and that this would have been at odds with other early catholic positions. What I will argue is that the text is authoritative for understanding the nature of God, and that the authors are not challenging the authority of the text. Rather, they are interpreting it (in admittedly different ways than what would later become normative).

²² See, e.g., King, *Secret Revelation*, 187.

²³ Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions* (NHMS 58; Leiden: Brill, 2006).

²⁴ Ibid., 10-12. Luttikhuisen actually puts forth two theses in the book: 1) the debate about the authority of scripture is to be located within an intra-Christian debate without any need to postulate a Jewish background for Gnosticism and 2) the Gnostics who engaged in this debate did not draw on any particular early Christian ideas that were later canonized (e.g., Pauline or Johannine) but rather drew upon different sources (especially Aristotle).

were engaged in a debate with early catholics about the authority of scripture.²⁵ The Gnostic approach is summed up by the introductory formula that is key to this dissertation: “It is not as Moses said.”²⁶ In other words, the authors of the *Apocryphon* did not find the biblical text authoritative and argued strenuously against the early catholics to that end.

For Luttikhuizen, then, the biblical text is wholly unreliable and useful only to refute those with whom the Gnostics disagree. This is especially clear in his treatment of the text from the *Apocryphon* that introduced this chapter. When the savior uses Isaiah 6:10 to correct Moses, Luttikhuizen suggests that this is simply for the sake of argument. He writes,

The reference to a proof text from Scripture could make sense as an argument *ad hominem* in a debate with opponents who attached value to the testimony of the biblical prophet. The opponents are blamed because they neglected the warning of the prophet (*for the sake of argument his words are taken seriously*), and continued to worship the demiurgical God and thus to live in ignorance.²⁷

It is worth noting that Luttikhuizen’s main question is around the origins of Gnosticism, not biblical interpretation *per se*. As such, his conclusions with regards to the authority of scripture in the *Apocryphon* serve to reinforce his theory about Gnostic origins. I wonder if this preoccupation with origins diverts his attention from the texts themselves and thus leads to a misconstrual of the evidence.

²⁵ Ibid. See especially chapter one, pp. 1-13 and chapter two, pp. 17-28.

²⁶ Ibid., 1. Luttikhuizen plainly states, “This formula [“It is not as Moses said”] is characteristic of the approach to biblical tradition in *ApJohn* and in related Gnostic texts.” Later he writes, “These [Gnostic] Christians used biblical stories and concepts with a view to exposing the inferiority of the demiurgical God and the ignorance of those fellow Christians who continued to worship this God and *to attach value to the texts testifying to his greatness and holiness*” (11, emphasis mine).

²⁷ Ibid., 20 (emphasis mine).

In other words, for Luttikhuizen, the authors of the *Apocryphon* not only rejected the text of Moses, but the entire Old Testament.²⁸ Their reference to the biblical text is simply to demonstrate its insufficiency.

Alastair H. D. Logan: A Dispute about Proper Interpretation

Karen King and Gerard Luttikhuizen demonstrate two ways in which scholars perceive a rejection of the biblical text in the *Apocryphon of John*. For King, there is a limited engagement with scripture that involves extensive use of proof texts. The authors of the *Apocryphon* treat the biblical text like any other text and mine it for whatever wisdom it may contain. In the end, however, they find much about the text problematic, and ultimately reject it. The problem with King's position, as will be seen, is that the authors of the *Apocryphon* do not just pick and choose those texts that are particularly helpful to their argument. Rather, they are deeply engaged in biblical interpretation, even when the text does not perfectly suit their purposes. Luttikhuizen, on the other hand, argues that the *Apocryphon* is completely critical of the biblical text. The Old Testament is rejected and only used for the sake of argument. The issue with Luttikhuizen's analysis is that not every text is rejected—very often the biblical text is read at face value

²⁸ Luttikhuizen seems to back off this assertion a bit in the conclusion to the chapter when he writes,

In discussions with other Christians, Gnostic Christians quoted, corrected, and rejected biblical texts with a view to demonstrating the superiority of their ideas and the superficiality of a Christian belief based on a literal understanding of the Old Testament. Apparently Gnostic Christians were able to discern some truth in the Old Testament, but in their opinion, this truth manifests itself only if the texts are understood in a special Gnostic way.

as something that speaks reliably about the spiritual world.²⁹ The object of criticism is the biblical god not the Bible itself.

Alastair Logan offers a more helpful description of the *Apocryphon*'s relationship to the biblical text.³⁰ He, like King,³¹ observes that Jesus Christ has become the "sole criterion and authority" and that this then leads to "a critical approach to the LXX as scripture."³² While a critical approach may in fact in some cases lead to a rejection of the text (here he cites Marcion as an example), such will not always be the case.³³ For the authors of the *Apocryphon*, the biblical text is reliable, functioning as "scripture," but in need of interpretation.³⁴ The debate between the Gnostics and early catholics, then, is not about the validity of the text (and whether or not it should be discarded).³⁵ Rather, the disagreement revolves around on whose authority the text will be interpreted and which

²⁹ For example, although Luttikhuisen will argue to the contrary, Ialdabaoth's boast ("I am god and there is no other"; NHC II 11,20-12 and NHC II 13,8-9 and pars.) reads the biblical text at face value—there is no subversion of the prophet's words, the biblical quote is understood to accurately (even authoritatively) reflect the divine reality. See below for a fuller discussion.

³⁰ See Logan, *The Gnostics*, 57-75.

³¹ See above, p. 41 n. 20.

³² Logan, *The Gnostics*, 62.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 62-63. Logan writes, "The Gnostics then do generally seem to accept the Old Testament as scripture, and appeal to certain key passages, particularly Genesis, if only as properly understood by appeal to their myth. Thus, although they are happy to accept other texts of varying provenance as holy books in essence attesting to their myth, the Old Testament nevertheless seems privileged." Logan is similar to King in this way—both observe how the *Apocryphon* will use many sources in support of their cosmogony. Logan is distinct in that he notes that the Old Testament holds a special place.

³⁵ Ibid., 63. Logan, following Larry Hurtado (*Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 535-38), notes that the biblical text appears to be more fixed in the early catholic tradition, thus offering evidence that early catholics were more text based in their "liturgical reading, homiletic exposition, and learned exegesis." This suggests to him that the early catholics found the LXX to be more authoritative than the authors of the *Apocryphon* did.

tradition will have the final say. This leads us to the second mischaracterization of the *Apocryphon*'s engagement with the biblical text—the intentional misreading.

Intentional Misreading of Scripture: Reverse or “Protest” Exegesis³⁶

As noted above, heresiologists from the start charged the Gnostics with misinterpreting the Bible.³⁷ Modern scholars, while not engaged in the same polemical struggle, have continued to see Gnostic interpretation of the Bible as an intentional misreading of the text. Hans Jonas, in his program to elucidate the “gnostic [sic] spirit” of protest,³⁸ sought to demonstrate how the Gnostic use of the Bible was governed by that basic guiding principle. In his description of the ancient allegorical method, Jonas writes that the use of allegory in the first century of the Common Era was generally conservative, and “never contradicted” nor “controverted” the myth and values.³⁹ Gnostic allegory, on the other hand,

...tries, not to demonstrate agreement, but to shock by blatantly subverting the meaning of the most firmly established, and preferably also the most revered elements of tradition. The rebellious tone of this type of allegory cannot be missed, and it therefore is one of the expressions of the revolutionary position which Gnosticism occupies in late classical culture.⁴⁰

³⁶ What follows in this section is deeply influenced by Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 54-79.

³⁷ In this section I refer to the Gnostics generally and not the *Apocryphon of John* specifically because much of the evidence (both ancient and modern) presented is speaking to the Gnostic phenomenon more broadly. Such a move is legitimate because the evidence used to substantiate the claims often refers to the *Apocryphon*.

³⁸ See, e.g., Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 2001). A helpful summary and critique of Jonas' work is found in King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 115-37.

³⁹ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 91. That the statement is such a broad generalization immediately raises red flags.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 92. Further on in his exposition of Gnostic use of the text, Jonas continues, “It is obvious that allegory, normally so respectable a means of harmonizing, is here made to carry the bravado of non-

In other words, Gnostic interpretation of texts is intentionally subversive to the basic (even “plain” or “intended”) meaning of the text. The Gnostics are guilty of intentional misreading as a part of their larger protest against the god of this world.⁴¹

Jonas’ characterization of Gnostic hermeneutics as subversive revolt continues to find broad support in the literature. As Michael Williams notes, “One of the features that has come to be viewed as characteristic of ‘gnosticism’ is a tendency to interpret Scripture in ways that to readers familiar with more traditional or orthodox interpretations often seem surprising or even shocking.”⁴² Some of the more recent words used to describe Gnostic hermeneutics include reverse,⁴³ revolt,⁴⁴ protest,⁴⁵ perverse,⁴⁶

conformity. Perhaps we should speak in such cases, not of allegory at all, but of a form of polemics, that is, not of an exegesis of the original text, but of its tendentious rewriting.” (95) At this point Jonas is discussing the reversal of the evaluation of Cain in Hippolytus’ report about the Peratae (*Haer.* V.16.9-10) but he makes similar statements about the *Apocryphon* throughout. His claim that the Gnostics do not exegete texts will be addressed shortly.

⁴¹ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 95. According to Jonas, they read against the “intended” meaning of the text because the “author [of the text], directly or indirectly, was their great adversary, the benighted creator god.”

⁴² Michael Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 54. He goes on to point out that although hermeneutics is not usually the first feature that receives attention in discussions of the Gnostic phenomenon, “it is nevertheless one of the most important [topics],” since it is used as key evidence in support of other commonly held ideas about Gnosticism.

⁴³ Søren Giversen, “The *Apocryphon of John* and Genesis,” *Studia Theologica* 17 (1963): 60-76.

⁴⁴ Already seen in Jonas above. See also, e.g., Nils Dahl, “The Arrogant Archon and the Lewd Sophia: Jewish Traditions in Gnostic Revolt,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 689-712 and Pearson, “Some Observations on Gnostic Hermeneutics,” 253.

Although in other books and articles Pearson appears to nuance his position with regards to *Ap. John*, in a 1990 reprint of a 1976 article (“Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature,” in *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 37), he writes, “Thus we have discovered in the anthropogenic myth in the *Apocryphon of John* a highly sophisticated use of the biblical text and Jewish traditions of interpretation thereon. What is of special interest, however, is the hermeneutical principle at work in the Gnostic synthesis. This hermeneutical principle can be described as one of revolt.” In his most recent general introduction to Gnosticism (*Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007]), Pearson appears to back off of the language of revolt in favor of “innovative reinterpretations.” For examples of this, see especially pp. 101-33.

manipulative,⁴⁷ inverse,⁴⁸ and misprision.⁴⁹ These loaded terms, however, do not always adequately reflect the evidence, particularly in the case of the *Apocryphon of John*. And while it is true that many Gnostic interpretations found in the *Apocryphon* are often (intentionally) distinct from early catholic readings that would later become normative, the labels obscure the ways in which Gnostic exegesis was akin to that of their contemporaries and create an impression that the Gnostics were somehow especially hostile to (and therefore also dismissive of) the biblical text.

There are several factors, however, that militate against such a conclusion. First, as is evident by the passage initially discussed in this chapter, there is no clear and consistent pattern of reversal or contradiction of the biblical witness.⁵⁰ Second, as Michael Williams has pointed out, many of those instances in the *Apocryphon* and other

⁴⁵ This label is especially associated with Kurt Rudolph. See e.g., Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 54. He goes so far as to describe their interpretive method as “contortionist’s tricks.” He seems to move away from this metaphor in a later article, “Bibel und Gnosis: Zum Verständnis jüdisch-biblischer Texte in der gnostischen Literatur, vornehmlich aus Nag Hammadi,” in *Gnosis und spätantike Religionsgeschichte*, ed. *Idem* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 190-209, here 201.

⁴⁶ Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), 145. The sentiment is later affirmed in Wilson, “The Gnostics and the Old Testament,” 164, when he writes that such an assessment is “beyond dispute.”

⁴⁷ Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 94.

⁴⁸ Ioan Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, trans. H. S. Wiesner (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 121-29. On p. 121, Culianu asserts that Gnostic hermeneutics are “not an innocent exegesis” and that “‘Inverse exegesis’ may be singled out as the main hermeneutical principle of the Gnostics.”

⁴⁹ Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 62. Cited in Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis*, 125.

⁵⁰ On this, see Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 57-63. Earlier studies (such as Filoramo and Gianotto, “L’interpretazione,” 56-63; Pearson, “Mikra in Gnostic Literature,” 636-46; and Nagel, “Die Auslegung der Paradieserzählung,” 51) focused on the diversity of interpretations among the various works found at Nag Hammadi. Williams stresses that not only are there differences among the various texts but also within any given text.

Gnostic texts that have been identified as clear cases of reverse exegesis also happen to be interpretations of particularly thorny biblical passages.⁵¹ While the Gnostic interpretation of a given “scriptural chestnut”⁵² may not be the same as what would later come to be the orthodox solution, it nonetheless reveals a concern to let the text speak. Third, and implicit in the second point, is that any assertion of value reversal assumes an inherent meaning in the text against which one is reading. Fourth, and finally, where a reversal is in fact present or a disagreement does exist, it does not necessarily follow that the reversal is an attempt to undermine the authority of the text. In the case of the *Apocryphon*, the biblical text is not the problem but the god it represents. Each of these points will presently be discussed in turn.

Intermittent Value Reversals

The savior directly contradicts Moses five times in the *Apocryphon*.⁵³ In four of the instances, Moses is mentioned by name. These are some of the clearest instances of a direct challenge to the biblical text in the Nag Hammadi corpus.⁵⁴ That said, in each of the instances where Moses is declared unreliable, his account is essentially interpreted, not simply rejected.⁵⁵ Although “it is not as Moses said,” the actions and values that Moses describes are maintained. In the first explicit disagreement (NHC II 13,18 and

⁵¹ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 63-75.

⁵² Borrowing the phrase from Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 63.

⁵³ For more on this, see chapter four below.

⁵⁴ They are thus often put forth as evidence of the hostile attitude that the Gnostics took towards the biblical text. See, e.g., Gruenwald, “Aspects of the Jewish-Gnostic Controversy, 717; Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 94; Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions*, 1.

⁵⁵ For more on this, see chapter three, esp. pp. 99-116 below.

pars.) Moses reliably narrates Wisdom's movement, but is corrected about the location of the movement. In the second correction (NHC II 22,12 and pars.) the serpent does not tempt Adam and Eve to eat, but it is still a nefarious figure who teaches them about sexual desire (σπορά ἐπιθυμία).⁵⁶ In the third explicit disagreement, the passage introduced at the beginning of this chapter (NHC II 22,22-24 and pars.), it is simply the nature of Adam's sleep that is refuted, and the savior's point is proven by appealing to the prophet Isaiah. In the fourth (NHC II 23,3-4 and pars.) the authors of the *Apocryphon* refute Moses on a minor point before immediately returning to the biblical account, quoting nearly verbatim Gen 2:23-24. In the fifth and final explicit correction (NHC II 29,6-7 and pars.) Moses is wrong about the hiding place, but correct in his valuation of Noah and the flood. In sum then, even when the *Apocryphon* is most critical, it still relies heavily on the biblical witness.

In some places, the biblical perspective is controverted without explicit reference. As is well documented, the biblical creator god is wicked and his creation is fundamentally flawed while wisdom (σοφία) is lewd (προύνικος⁵⁷) and the cause of the cosmic rupture that leads to the ills of the world. These are both very real disagreements with key ideas found throughout the LXX. However, as will be seen below, the *Apocryphon's* depiction of the creator God is not without evidence from the biblical text.

⁵⁶ NHC II 22,13-14 is even closer to the biblical text when it describes how the serpent teaches them "to eat (οὖον) from the wickedness of sexual desire."

⁵⁷ On the meaning of προύνικος, see Dahl, "Arrogant Archon," 706-12; Anne Pasquier, "Prouneikos. A Colorful Expression to Designate Wisdom in Gnostic Texts," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen King (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 47-66, and the response from Marvin Meyer in the same volume, pp. 67-70.

Indeed, as will be argued, exegesis of the text could lead one to the conclusion that the creator god was in fact wicked and ignorant.⁵⁸

Moreover, at several points in the *Apocryphon*, Moses' account is taken at face value, without any hint of mistrust or criticism, even when Moses' version of events does not fit comfortably in the narrative. Human beings are created in the image of God (NHC II 15,2-4 and pars.) and animated by an in-blowing of the divine spirit (NHC II 19,23-27 and pars.). Adam and Eve are placed in a garden of delights and given commands about the trees contained therein (NHC II 21,17-22,2 and pars.).⁵⁹ Upon eating of the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve are clothed and cast out of the garden (NHC II 24,6-8 and pars.). Many more examples follow in the sections below. From this brief litany it should be clear, however, that the authors of the *Apocryphon* hold in tension reliance upon and a critical attitude towards the biblical text.

Scriptural Chestnuts

In Michael Williams' first move to "dismantle" the Gnostic category he notes that many of the Gnostic interpretations that would be considered "reversals" actually deal with very problematic biblical passages.⁶⁰ He writes,

⁵⁸ The value reversal of Wisdom is more difficult to explain. For an attempt, see George MacRae, "The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth," *NovT* 12.2 (1970): 86-101. The reversal is mitigated by the fact that biblical Wisdom is represented by two figures in the *Apocryphon*—Barbelo and Sophia. In this way, the use of Wisdom motifs in the *Apocryphon* is somewhat ambiguous—there is both a higher and a lower Wisdom figure. That said, it is Sophia—Wisdom—that is identified as the source of ills. Even though Barbelo possesses certain attributes associated with Jewish wisdom, she is not explicitly identified as such (compare Achamoth/Echamoth described in, e.g., *Gos. Phil.* 60,10-15; *1 Apoc. Jas.* 34,1-20; Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.21.5).

⁵⁹ It is true that the values of the trees appear to be reversed, but this may be an attempt to solve an exegetical difficulty. See below, "Scriptural Chestnuts."

⁶⁰ See esp. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 63-76.

When we examine the overall use of Jewish scripture across the whole assortment of sources conventionally labeled “gnostic,” what we discover is that these instances of countertraditional interpretation that have so often captivated the attention of modern scholars tend almost always to involve passages or elements from Jewish scriptures that were notorious “difficulties.” Some of these “scriptural chestnuts” had begun to be perceived as problems generations or centuries before the beginning of the Common Era, and their difficulties had been resolved in various ways.⁶¹

Williams goes on to briefly discuss several biblical passages that were problematic to ancient interpreters such as Aristobulus, Philo of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and others. The texts that they found knotty and thus sought (through various strategies) to unravel include Genesis 1:26-27 (which implies a plurality of gods through the use of “let us”), the paradise story (which reflects poorly on the creator god in his apparent ignorance and desire that Adam and Eve do not eat of the tree that gives knowledge), and the flood (which reveals a fickle and violent deity). Whereas ancient Jewish and early catholic interpreters sought to mitigate this unflattering picture of God, Gnostic interpreters took the texts at face value. The “value reversal” is not directed toward the text but the god Jews and early catholics struggled to defend.

In the case of the *Apocryphon*, each of the Mosaic texts that are explicitly refuted is in fact particularly difficult and led to many creative interpretive solutions. Each will be discussed briefly in turn.

Sophia’s movement (NHC II 13,18 and pars.)

The first correction deals with Gen 1:2, a particularly difficult text that narrates how the spirit of God is borne upon (ἐπιφέρεσθαί) the primordial waters. The middle

⁶¹ Ibid., 63. Williams notes that many of these problem passages contained anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms, or reflected poorly on a key biblical figure.

form of the verb itself is rare in biblical literature.⁶² In the LXX, this precise form of ἐπιφέρω occurs only in two texts: Gen 1:2 and Gen 7:18.⁶³ Moreover, as Zlatko Pleše notes,

In the original context of the Mosaic account of creation, the verb denotes the local movement of a physical entity (the divine *pneuma* in Gen 1:2b, and Noah's ark in Gen 7:18) over material substrate (water in both cases), so that [it is not clear] how the use of this verb, with all its materialistic overtones, should be accounted for in the present context.⁶⁴

In short, the odd verb and its connotations proved problematic to ancient interpreters.

Pleše, using the commentary from Procopius of Gaza (PG 87, 45-48) as his starting point, outlines the many ways ancient interpreters sought to explain this passage—some taking the material connotations at face value, comparing the movement of the spirit moving on the waters to a “brooding bird, setting it in motion (κινεῖν) and producing living creatures.”⁶⁵ Other interpreters found the material inferences problematic and insisted that the πνεῦμα must stand for either air or wind. Still others focused on the rushing waters and saw the passage as a reference to the waters of

⁶² The fact that the verb is left untranslated in the shorter version (see BG 45,1, 7, 19) may be evidence of the translator's uncertainty about the meaning of the word.

⁶³ Janet Timbie, “‘What is ἐπιφέρει?’ Genesis 1:2b in the Sahidic Version of the LXX and the *Apocryphon of John*,” in *Studies in the Greek Bible: Essays in Honor of Francis T. Gignac, S.J.*, ed. Jeremy Corley and Vincent Skimp (CBQMS 44; Washington D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2008), 35-46, here 38. A survey of Hatch and Redpath, s.v., reveals that the middle form occurs just two other times in the entire LXX: in variant readings of Wis 17:7 (S¹) and 4 Macc 15:6 (S). Gen 1:2 is the only place in the LXX where ἐπιφέρεσθαι is used to translate piel form of the Hebrew verb עָנָן. There is no specific definition for the middle form of ἐπιφέρω in BDAG and no entry for the word at all in Lampe.

⁶⁴ Zlatko Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe: Narrative and Cosmology in the Apocryphon of John* (NHMS 52; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 235. It is worth noting that Gen 7:18, in nearly an identical formulation to Gen 1:2, describes how the ark is carried upon the waters (ἐπεφέρετο ἡ κιβωτὸς ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 225. All of the subsequent interpretations in this paragraph are further detailed in Pleše, *Poetics*, 225-26.

baptism. Finally, some exegetes interpreted the passage allegorically, with the “Biblical *pneuma* as the Holy Spirit, the primordial ‘waters’ as holy powers, and the ‘deep’ (ἄβυσσος) below them as evil powers ruled by the devil and his ‘darkness’ (σκότος).”⁶⁶ Later interpreters, ultimately following the lead of Philo of Alexandria, would allow for the various interpretations to stand in tension with one another as literal and spiritual. The *Apocryphon*, for its part, reads the text literally. It can do so because it equates πνεῦμα θεοῦ with the lower, and flawed, deity, Wisdom. Her movement is expected.⁶⁷ The wide variety of interpretations (without even delving into the many Gnostic attempts at explanation⁶⁸) bears witness to the problematic nature of this passage.

Adam’s sleep (NHC II 22,22-24 and pars.)

Likewise, the second criticism of Moses interprets a potentially problematic biblical passage—Gen 2:21. In this text, God brings a deep sleep upon Adam.⁶⁹ As in many of the difficult passages noted above, God in this passage is depicted in rather anthropomorphic terms. Perhaps more significant is that God is the one who casts the trance that makes Adam sleep. In Greco-Roman antiquity sleep already could carry a

⁶⁶ Ibid., 225.

⁶⁷ For further on this, see Michael Williams, *The Immovable Race: A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity* (NHMS 29; Leiden: Brill, 1985), 111-22.

⁶⁸ For a helpful summary of the many interpretations, see Antonio Orbe, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ The LXX reads, “καὶ ἐπέβαλεν ὁ θεὸς ἕκστασιν ἐπὶ τὸν Ἀδὰμ, καὶ ὑπνωσεν.” The translators of the LXX also use ἕκστασις in Gen 15:12 to translate תרדמה, a deep sleep (usually brought on by God) (see BDB, s.v.). Otherwise, the word, as its etymology would suggest, refers to a mantic or trance-like state. Philo, *Leg.* 2.31, appears to recognize the difficulty with the use of ἕκστασις where he argues that it is right (ὀρθῶς) for Moses to speak thus, “For the mind’s trance and change is its sleep... (γὰρ ἕκστασις καὶ τροπὴ τοῦ νοῦ ὕπνος ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ)” (trans. Colson and Whitaker, LCL).

fairly negative connotation.⁷⁰ This is especially the case in philosophical circles as it could be used to represent the abnegation of the mind.⁷¹ We find a similar attitude in Jewish sources with a decidedly moral bent.⁷² Philo of Alexandria writes, “And that deep and abysmal sleep (βαθὺς καὶ διωλύγιος ὕπνος) which holds fast all the wicked robs the mind of true apprehensions, and fills it with false phantasms and untrustworthy visions and persuades it to approve of the blameworthy as laudable...”⁷³ Similarly, the author of Psalms of Solomon writes,

When my soul dozed (Ἐν τῷ νυστάζει ψυχὴν) from the Lord, I slipped down for a time; When it sank into sleep (ἐν καταφορᾷ ὑπνούντων), [I was] far from God. For a moment my soul was poured out to death; (I was near) the gates of Hades with the sinner. Thus my soul was drawn away from the Lord God of Israel, unless the Lord had come to my aid with his everlasting mercy. He jabbed me as a horse is goaded to keep it awake (ἐπὶ τὴν γρηγόρησιν); my savior and protector at all times saved me.⁷⁴

The *Sentences of the Syriac Menander* (4th century CE) simply states, “Sleep carries us into Sheol.”⁷⁵ Texts such as these illustrate how God’s causing sleep to fall upon Adam would be potentially knotty.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Horst Balz, “ὕπνος κτλ.,” *TDNT* VIII:545-56, here 547-48.

⁷¹ See, e.g., Plato, *Resp.* VI, 503d; VII, 537d; IX, 571c-572b; Epictetus, *Diss.* 2.20.15.

⁷² See, e.g., Sir 22:9; 4 *Macc* 5:11; Philo, *De somn.* 1.121; *Test. Rub.* 3:1-9; *Syr. Men.* 68. Evald Lövestam (*Spiritual Wakefulness in the New Testament* [Lund: Gleerup, 1963], 8-24 and *passim*) discusses these and other relevant Jewish texts.

⁷³ Philo, *Somn.* 2.162 (Colson and Whitaker, LCL). See also *Migr.* 222; *QG* 4.2.

⁷⁴ *Pss. Sol.* 16.1-4 (trans. Wright, *OTP*, with modifications).

⁷⁵ *Syr. Men.* 2.68 (trans. Baarda, *OTP*).

⁷⁶ Many ancient authors also connected Eve’s creation to Adam’s downfall. This idea is perhaps most clearly articulated by Philo in *Opif.* 151 when he writes, “And woman becomes for him the beginning

Adam's rib (NHC II 23,3-4 and pars.)

Immediately after God casts a trance on Adam that causes him to sleep, the biblical text narrates how God took one of Adam's ribs and used it to form the woman (Gen 2:21-22). As with the previous texts, the materialistic and anthropomorphic depiction of God presents certain difficulties.⁷⁷ The use of the rib (πλευρόν) is odd as well. Philo of Alexandria makes this clear when he puts forth the following litany of questions:

How could anyone admit that a woman, or a human being at all, came into existence out of a man's side? And what was there to hinder the First Cause from creating woman, as he created man, out of earth? ... And why, when there were so many parts to choose from, did he form the woman not from some other part but from the side? And which side did he take? For we may assume that only two are indicated, as there is in fact nothing to suggest a large number of them. Did he take the left or the right side? If he filled up with flesh (the place of) the one which he took, are we to suppose that the one which he left was *not* made of flesh? ... What then are we to say?⁷⁸

On account of these problems, Philo asserts that the literal sense of the text is in fact mythical (μυθώδης) and this therefore justifies an allegorical interpretation.⁷⁹

Philo is not alone in his discomfort with the text. When Celsus criticizes Gen 2:21-22 (because he found it problematic), Origen's response is like that of

of blameworthy life." See also, e.g., *Sib. Or.* 1.42-45; 1 Tim 2:13; *L.A.E.*, *passim*; *Gos. Phil.* 68,22-26. That the God-induced trance led to Eve's creation could plausibly add an even more negative connotation.

⁷⁷ Celsus took issue with the text, arguing that "the more reasonable Jews and Christians are ashamed of these things and try somehow to allegorize them." (*apud* Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.38 [trans. Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 213.]). It is not clear from the context, however, if it is the sleep or the anthropomorphism that is disturbing. I suspect that it is the latter given Origen's response.

⁷⁸ *Leg.* 2.19-20; trans. Colson and Whitaker, LCL (italics original).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.19. Philo is much more laconic in *QG* 1.25 (trans. Marcus, LCL) when simply states, "The literal sense is clear." He then, like in the *Leg.* 2, proceeds to interpret the scene symbolically.

Philo—if Celsus were to quote the rest of the passage it would be clear that it is meant to be interpreted allegorically.⁸⁰ Origen goes on to explain that the Greek myths were equally legendary but philosophers nonetheless would mine them for insight. In other words, Origen does not apologize for the apparent absurdity of the literal meaning of the text. Instead he appeals to freedom in interpretation.⁸¹

Noah's hiding (NHC II 29,6-7 and pars.)

The final correction of Moses concerns Noah. In addition to the story's many provocative ideas—the destruction of wickedness through a flood, the one man's fidelity and subsequent salvation, to name two—the story also presented several difficulties.⁸² There is the problem with the fickle god who cannot control his flawed creation. Very shortly after finishing his work, the god laments his creation and repents, vowing its total destruction. Celsus again shows how the story contains inherent difficulties when he asks, "How can [God] repent when they become ungrateful and wicked, and find fault with his own handiwork, and hate and threaten and destroy his own offspring?"⁸³ This temperamental picture of God troubled faithful Jews as well. As Michael Williams notes,

⁸⁰ See Origen, *Contra Celsum* 4.37-38.

⁸¹ *L.A.B.* 32:15 is not discussed in this section but perhaps relevant. The author of this relatively nonsectarian (and conservatively rewritten) text makes clear that God's act of taking the rib from Adam was not unjust, suggesting that some may have found the idea problematic.

⁸² On the interpretation of this episode in Gnostic literature and the deep dependence of that literature on other Jewish interpretations see Gedaliahu Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (NHMS 24; Leiden: Brill, 1984). The thorny nature of the flood narrative is evident in the vast amounts of ancient Jewish and early Christian texts written to interpret it. For a discussion of many of those texts, see Jack Lewis, *A Study of Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1968) and Dorothy Peters, *Noah Traditions in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Conversations and Controversies of Antiquity* (SBLEJL 26; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

⁸³ Apud Origen, *Cels.* 6.58 (trans. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum*, 374.)

the authors of Jubilees and Pseudo Philo simply omitted God's repentance in their retelling of the story.⁸⁴ The LXX, too, softens the language of the Hebrew: “καὶ ἐνεθυμήθη ὁ θεὸς ὅτι ἐποίησεν τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς καὶ διενόηθη” (Gen 6:6; “And God considered⁸⁵ how he made human beings on the earth and thought about it”).⁸⁶ The LXX does not completely remove the problems—upon considering his creation, God decides to destroy it in anger (Gen 6:7 LXX).⁸⁷ It is clear, too, that the idea that God repented continued to carry interpretive weight, even if the text no longer explicitly referred to that action.⁸⁸

Summary

The preceding discussion has aimed to demonstrate how some biblical texts could present interpretive difficulties to the ancient exegete. Each of these passages will be more fully explored in the next chapter, with particular attention to how, in spite of the

⁸⁴ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 73. See *Jub.* 5.6 and *L.A.B.* 3.1-3.

⁸⁵ According to LSJ, s.v., ἐνθυμέομαι most commonly means “to think deeply” or “to lay to heart.” It can also connote, as the in the original Hebrew of Gen 6:6, “to take to heart, be concerned or angry.” BDAG, s.v., defines ἐνθυμέομαι, “to process information by thinking about it carefully, *reflect (on), consider, think.*”

⁸⁶ Origen's response to Celsus is thus somewhat true when he writes, “Celsus asserts something which is not written in the Bible as if it were indicated by the scriptures. For a repentance on God's part is not mentioned in these words; nor that he finds fault with and hates his own handiwork.” (*Cels.* 6.58; trans. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum*, 374). In spite of the fact that the LXX no longer uses the language of repentance, the sense of the text still stands—God sees his wicked creation, considers it, and decides to destroy it in anger (Gen 6:5-7 LXX). Moreover, as the author of the *Hexapla*, Origen was surely aware of the biblical basis whence Celsus derived the idea that God repented.

⁸⁷ Gen 6:7 LXX: καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός ἀπαλείψω τὸν ἄνθρωπον ὃν ἐποίησα ἀπὸ προσώπου τῆς γῆς ... ὅτι ἐθυμώθη ὅτι ἐποίησας αὐτούς.

⁸⁸ In addition to Celsus' criticism, Philo, using the LXX, argues against the idea that Gen 6:5-7 implies that God changed his mind (see *Deus* 21). In *Ap. John*, just before Ialdabaoth brings the flood (NHC II 28,32-33 and pars.), we are told that he “repented (Δϣϣ 2THϣ).” The use of this verb comes as a bit of a surprise as ΜΟΚΜΕΚ (to think, to ponder) is the most commonly used Coptic word for ἐνθυμέομαι. According to Crum's Greek index, ϣ 2TH is never used to translate ἐνθυμέομαι.

dismissive rhetoric, the authors of the *Apocryphon* worked to solve those difficulties. At present, suffice to say that Jewish, early catholic, and pagan interpreters found the passages problematic. The ancient exegetes used different strategies and came to divergent conclusions as they struggled to understand them. It should be no surprise then that the authors of the *Apocryphon* (as well as other Gnostics) also wrestled with the text. The diverse interpretations found in the *Apocryphon* do not constitute a reversal of meaning of the text—in each of the passages discussed in this section, the meaning was not always clear or agreed upon.⁸⁹ As Michael Williams explains, “*If there is a pattern of ‘value reversal’ here, it is that when such reversal does appear, it seems usually to result from an adjustment of some problem element in the text, some ‘scriptural chestnut’ that had been recognized as a difficulty by generations of interpreters.*”⁹⁰ Thus, Jewish and early catholic exegetes were making similar moves that led to diverse interpretations. This brings us to the third problem with labeling Gnostic interpretation some form of protest—such identification assumes there is an inherent meaning in the text to which they are responding.

⁸⁹ It is worth noting that while the four texts explored presented problems to ancient Jewish and early catholic interpreters, they fit nicely into the Gnostic cosmology. Because the creator god and his creator are lower deities, subject to passions and anthropomorphisms, the texts are not interpreted inversely, but taken at face value. Sophia did move back and forth, Ialdabaoth did cast a trance on Adam and pull out his rib, and Ialdabaoth did repent of his creation and consume it with a flood. If a reversal is present, it is a reversal of interpretations that try to explain away the inherent difficulties of the passages.

⁹⁰ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 77 (italics mine).

*Inherent Meaning?*⁹¹

As should be now clear from the preceding discussion of problematic passages the “meaning” of any given biblical text is not always obvious. The gaps and difficulties that posed problems to interpreters from diverse theological perspectives led to a variety of creative solutions.⁹² Often enough Gnostic proposals were distinct from other Jewish and early catholic interpretations (and, as was demonstrated above, many times they were not!⁹³). In many cases, however, there is no consensus on how to interpret a given text. As we saw above in the case of God’s repentance, some interpreters simply omitted the troubling text, others flatly denied its “plain” sense, and still others took it at face value. In short, when modern scholars speak of a reversal of meaning or a protest exegesis, they are reading the Gnostic interpretation against what has only later come to be seen as the plain or obvious meaning of a given text. Giovanni Filoramo is a good example of this when he asserts that “Even the reader who is not entirely familiar with the Biblical texts will be struck by the way in which the Gnostic editors manipulate the sacred text in order

⁹¹ I do not wish to argue that texts in general have no meaning, or that, along with Foucault, the author is “dead” (see, e.g., Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, ed. Vassilis Lambropoulos and David Neal Miller [Albany: State University Press of New York, 1987], 124-42). Readers are always participating in making meaning, but they must do so within the parameters of the text. In the case of scriptural chestnuts, much more meaning comes from the reader than from the text.

⁹² Gerard Luttikhuisen (*Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions* [NHMS 58; Leiden: Brill, 2006], xi) helpfully draws attention to the fact that “selective and critical interpretations are likely to indicate that there is a gap between the thought pattern of the reader and the text as he or she understands it.” This gap, which all Jews and Christians experienced (and continue to experience—this is not an exclusively Gnostic problem) is what allows for wildly divergent readings of the text that are nonetheless born out of the text.

⁹³ Recall that in *Ap. John*, the authors agree with the more common Jewish and early catholic understanding of the serpent (NHC II 22,12-15 and pars.), Cain (NHC II 24,4-25 and pars.), Seth (NHC II 24,35-25,2 and pars.), and Noah (NHC II 28,3-29,15 and pars.). We will explore these and several other points of convergence below.

to make it suit their purposes.”⁹⁴ Robert Grant offers a more helpful assessment. He writes,

Early in the Christian era many Gnostics treated the OT much as Hellenized Jews and Christians treated it. That is to say, they took literally what they thought was clear and in agreement with their religious outlook and they took allegorically what was obscure and not in agreement. For such persons the inspiration of the OT books was rarely a problem; more often, it was a basic assumption.⁹⁵

The last sentence is key to the present point. Far from protesting against or manipulating or rejecting the biblical text, the authority of the LXX and faithful interpretation of it are axiomatic to the authors of the *Apocryphon*.

Criticism ≠ Rejection

The three points discussed thus far—inconsistent “value reversal,” scriptural chestnuts, and lack of inherent meaning—provide substantial evidence against any assertion that the authors of the *Apocryphon* treated the biblical text with some sort of attitude of protest or disregard. Rather, they are working with the text to find meaning. The very struggle to find meaning in abstruse biblical texts around which there is no

⁹⁴ Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, 94.

⁹⁵ Robert Grant, “Gnostics and the Inspiration of the Old Testament,” in *Scripture in History and Theology: Essays in Honor of J. Coert Rylaarsdam*, ed. Arthur Merrill and Thomas Overholt (The Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series 17; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1977), 269. With reference to early catholic use of the Bible, Richard Hays and Joel Green (“The Use of the Old Testament by New Testament Writers,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel Green [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995], 222-38, here 229) write (perhaps too cautiously), “...the NT writers frequently seem to produce surprising readings of the scriptural texts, surprising because some are at variance with what most modern critics might regard as the original sense of the OT text.”

consensus suggests that the authors of the *Apocryphon* found value within those very texts.⁹⁶

To this point, Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora* is again a helpful analogue. Ptolemy asserts at several points that the law of Moses is "incomplete (ἄτελῆ)" and "incongruous (ἄνοικείας) with the nature (φύσει) and intentions (γνώμη)" of a good god.⁹⁷ In support of this, Ptolemy put forth a tripartite origin of the law. Some parts are from the highest god, some parts are from Moses, and some parts are from the traditions of the elders.⁹⁸ In spite of his criticism of Moses—those parts of the law for which Moses is responsible are ultimately rejected⁹⁹—Ptolemy is nonetheless explicit in his defense of Moses and the biblical text.¹⁰⁰ Those who say the law is the product of the devil are "completely

⁹⁶ This point is made well by Pheme Perkins, "Gnosticism and the Christian Bible," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 355-71, here 361-66.

⁹⁷ Ptolemy, *Letter to Flora* 33.3.4. See also 33.4.6; 33.4.10. The standard critical edition is edited by Gilles Quispel, *Ptolémée, Lettre à Flora: Analyse, texte critique, traduction, commentaire et index grec*, 2nd ed. (Sources chrétiennes 24; Paris: Le Cerf, 1966). English translations consulted include Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 306-15 and Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Book I (Sects 1-46)*, 2nd rev. ed. (NHMS 63; Leiden: Brill, 2009).

⁹⁸ Ibid. The system is further developed in which the "divine" parts of the scriptures are further divided into three: "pure" legislation which the savior came to fulfill, law mixed with inferior ideas and injustices that the savior abolished, and law that must be interpreted allegorically and symbolically (see 33.5.1-2).

⁹⁹ In the final analysis, Ptolemy makes it clear that he does not allow that the true laws come from Moses when he writes, "...the analysis of the law as a whole, as we have divided it here, has made it clear which part of it is genuine," and then continues with an explication of the divine law (33.4.14).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 33.4.6. Ptolemy acknowledges that on the basis of Jesus' (the savior's!) teaching (see Matt 19:8, which appears to interpret Deut 24:1-4), Moses is wrong in his approval of divorce. In spite of this error, and in spite of the fact that he does not think that those parts of the law that are from Moses are authoritative, Ptolemy is at pains to defend Moses. So much so that Hans van Campenhausen (*Formation*, 87 n.138) notes that "The alleged diabolic origin of the O.T. is more harshly rejected by Ptolemaeus than the opposite catholic position... This is not just another aspect of his desire to win converts. It is clear that in the Valentinian camp Marcion's total rejection of the O.T. was regarded as more dangerous than its uncritical acceptance in the Great Church."

misguided (πάντως δὲ διέπταισαν)”¹⁰¹ and have “failed to obtain the truth (διημαρτήκασιν τῆς ἀληθείας).” Ptolemy, like the authors of the *Apocryphon*, supports his position with teaching from the savior (with clear dependence upon the Gospel of Matthew) and citations from Paul.¹⁰²

In the case of the *Apocryphon*, as has been reiterated throughout this discussion, the object of criticism is not the text but the god it depicts. The authors of *Ap. John* do make consistent hermeneutical moves, but they are not necessarily value reversals. Rather, those texts that make the creator god appear unseemly are taken at face value, the “plain” sense of the text is unquestioned. As Karen King has pointed out, in the interpretation of other biblical texts, the authors use “narrative elaboration” to add details that reflect poorly on the creator god.¹⁰³ These additions, however, do not aim to undermine the authority of the text. The many texts that speak to the goodness of the creator and his creation are generally ignored.¹⁰⁴ As we have seen, both Jewish and early catholic interpretations made similar exegetical moves and such selective reading does not in any way suggest revolt or protest.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 33.3.2. See also 33.7.3.

¹⁰² Ibid. 33.6.6. It is clear that Ptolemy places a primacy on the teachings of Jesus, going so far as to call his words the only teaching “by which alone we are surely guided to the perception of truth” (33.3.8). As noted by von Campenhausen, *Formation*, 87, this emphasis on the words of Jesus weakens his defense of the OT, and his “middle way” ultimately leads to a disintegration of “the Canon as a normative entity in the strict sense.”

¹⁰³ King, *Secret Revelation*, 186. She cites the bestial appearance of Ialdabaoth (NHC II 10,4-9 and pars.) as key evidence.

¹⁰⁴ King (ibid.) helpfully observes, “The framers carefully included only those materials which could be readily harmonized with the work’s overall perspective, leaving many significant materials out of their narrative. For example, Jewish wisdom literature frequently praises God for His goodness in creating the physical world—this perspective has no place in the *Secret Revelation of John*.”

Summary

In this section I have argued that the exegesis that we find in the *Apocryphon* is not best understood as a “protest” against the biblical text or a reversal of its values. In the first place, the biblical text is not consistently contradicted. In spite of the insistence that “it is as not Moses said,” the *Apocryphon* often accepts his account at face value. Second, the biblical texts interpreted by the *Apocryphon* are often ambiguous and generally have no agreed upon meaning. The hermeneutical strategies employed by the authors of the *Apocryphon* are similar to their Jewish and early catholic counterparts. Finally, where there is a reversal, the biblical text is not the object of criticism. Rather, it is the creator god (and presumably those who worship him).

The Biblical Text as Foundational

To this point I have worked to demonstrate how perceived rejections or subversive interpretations might be better understood as creative problem solving. The present section will explore how, far from abandoning or assaulting the scriptures, the *Apocryphon* is rather deeply dependent upon the biblical text.¹⁰⁵ This is seen at three levels: theologically, structurally, and exegetically. At the theological level, the *Apocryphon*’s conceptions of the divine reality, especially its depiction of the creator, are rooted in the biblical text. At the structural level, the narrative of the *Apocryphon* closely approximates the biblical narrative (and is therefore clearly dependent upon it). Finally,

¹⁰⁵ Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, 88, articulates well the position I will be arguing against when he writes, “Far from being exegeses (however much they claim to be) of the Biblical text, they are put forward as the true Bible, containing new, or rather the only true, myths of origins, while the Biblical accounts are merely false, deceptive traditions.” Although Filoramo is speaking of Gnostic texts generally, the *Apocryphon* is consistently cited as evidence.

at the exegetical level the *Apocryphon* carefully cites and interprets several individual biblical texts, even when reference to the texts is not expected or even necessary. Each of these levels will be discussed in turn.

Biblical Theology in the *Apocryphon of John*

Several scholars have already argued that certain Gnostic ideas are deeply rooted in the biblical text. George MacRae concluded that the theme of sleep, which is so integral to the *Apocryphon*'s soteriology, essentially arose out of a close reading of Genesis.¹⁰⁶ In his discussion of key characteristics of *Ap. John*, Michel Tardieu argues that the authors of the text are better classified as exegetes than (mystical) visionaries and concludes that regarding the *Apocryphon* "on a donc affaire, d'un bout à l'autre, à un exercice d'interprétation."¹⁰⁷ At the conclusion of his study on Jewish traditions in Gnostic mythology, Guy Stroumsa suggests that "the emergence of Gnosticism was strongly related to *exegetical* problems of the first chapters of Genesis."¹⁰⁸ In a brief 1988 summary of Mikra in Gnostic texts, Birger Pearson uses the evidence from his survey to conclude,

The earliest Gnostic literature was heavily indebted to the text of Mikra and biblical exegetical traditions. Though the Gnostics denigrated the

¹⁰⁶ George MacRae, "Sleep and Awakening in Gnostic Texts," in *Le origini dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina 13-18 Aprile 1966*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 496-507, here, 498. This assertion is part of a larger argument about the influence of Jewish ideas on Gnostic thinking. The early date of this argument is noteworthy.

¹⁰⁷ Michel Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques: Codex de Berlin* (Sources Gnostiques et Manichéennes 1; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1984), 35. Tardieu sees three distinct exegetical sections: The first (NHC II, 2,13-9,24 and pars.) is an exegesis of the statement, "I am the Father, Mother, Son" (NHC II 2,13-14//BG 21,19-21); the second (NHC II 9,25-25,1 and pars.), an exegesis of Gen 1-4; the third (NHC II 25,2-30,11 and pars.), a series of questions and answers akin to Rabbinic catechism.

¹⁰⁸ Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 170.

biblical Creator by relegating him to an inferior position below a transcendent deity, they did not reject the Bible itself. On the contrary, they came to their radical theology and worldview in the very process of *interpreting* the scriptural text, the authoritative ('canonical') status of which was self-evident.¹⁰⁹

While the claims of the aforementioned scholars certainly support the current argument, perhaps most significant for the purposes of this dissertation is Michael Williams' proposal that idiosyncrasies of the scriptural text itself may very well have led to many of their fundamental beliefs.¹¹⁰ In other words, Gnostics did not engage in biblical exegesis simply when it suited their purposes (i.e., they were not combing for proof texts¹¹¹). Rather, they found the germ of their religion in problematic biblical texts (many of which are discussed above).¹¹² This marks a significant shift from many other studies. As Williams notes, although many scholars recognize the dependence of Gnostic texts (such as the *Apocryphon*) on the Bible, the general tendency is to look to outside

¹⁰⁹ Pearson, "Mikra in Gnostic Literature," 651 (*italics original*). Pearson was noted above as one of the scholars who sees Gnostic interpretation as "revolt" (see n. 44 above). He often characterizes their interpretation in that way. A clear example of this is found in his 1976 article in *ANRW* II.21.1 (published in 1984), "Philo and Gnosticism," pp. 338f., where he writes, "The [Gnostic] myth is constructed with absolute sovereignty over the biblical text, to the point of explicitly refuting it where it is useful to do so. The text and various (Jewish!) traditions of exegesis are re-interpreted with a revolutionary abandon which reflects utmost contempt for the Biblical Creator and all his works and ways." In the Mikra article he avoids contradiction by positing a development in Gnostic treatment of the LXX, beginning with a generally positive disposition and evolving then (in some circles) to a more antagonistic stance.

¹¹⁰ Michael Williams, "The Demonizing of the Demiurge: The Innovation of Gnostic Myth," in *Innovations in Religious Traditions*, ed. M. A. Williams, C. Cox, and M. S. Jaffee (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 73-107.

¹¹¹ For further evidence against the idea that Gnostics simply sought out proof texts, see also Rodolphe Kasser, "Citations des Grands Prophètes Bibliques dans les Textes Gnostiques Coptes," in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts*, ed. Martin Krause (NHMS 6; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 56-64.

¹¹² For examples and brief discussions of the texts that Williams finds salient, see Williams, "Demonizing of the Demiurge," 87-91.

social forces, especially potentially traumatic events, to explain the development of their thinking (and thus also the lens through which they read the biblical text).¹¹³

Williams, on the other hand, notes that there is no need for (and really no evidence of) an external trauma that led to Gnostic thinking.¹¹⁴ Rather, the evidence from Nag Hammadi suggests that it was the texts themselves that created the “problems.”¹¹⁵ He writes,

Not only is there very little evidence that the motivation behind Gnostic innovation can be traced to a social crisis faced by Jews, such theories have only distracted attention from the greater importance of other explanatory factors, for which there *is* direct and abundant evidence in Gnostic sources.

I especially have in mind concern over exegetical problems and problematic scriptural passages, issues of theodicy, and the influence of ascetic presuppositions. That some of these factors were involved in the birth of Gnosticism has been suggested by others, and has been defended at some length in several important studies. But the full significance of such factors has not been appreciated.¹¹⁶

In the years since the publication of this article, the “full significance of such factors” has continued to be underappreciated. At present, in an attempt to redress this devaluation, I

¹¹³ Ibid., 91 and *passim*. Williams discusses three works at length: Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (SJLA 25; Leiden: Brill, 1977); Jarl Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origin of Gnosticism* (WUNT 36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985); and Gedaliahu Stroumsa, *Another Seed*. The view that some crisis led to the formulation of the Gnostic system is briefly discussed above in chapter one, n. 34.

¹¹⁴ Scholars who are looking for a Jewish origin of Gnosticism must find some point at which a change occurred. The logic is that at some point Gnostic authors interpreted the Bible as Jews but then at some point began to interpret the text in novel ways. For the purposes of this dissertation, the “change” has already taken place, and the ideas inherent in the scriptural text can thus come to the fore.

¹¹⁵ As I will argue, “problem” is a bit of a misnomer. The texts are problematic only if you are a monotheist who believes in a good and rational God. For the authors of the *Apocryphon*, they are grist for the mill.

¹¹⁶ Williams, “Demonizing of the Demiurge,” 86 (*italics original*).

will argue that the biblical text itself and the cultural milieu in which it was read led to key Gnostic ideas about the creator god. Ialdabaoth's arrogant boast (NHC II 11,19-21 and II 13,8-9//BG 44,14-15) will be the key text in this discussion.

The Arrogant Boast

When the evil demiurge Ialdabaoth finishes his creation of the cosmos, he looks around and proclaims, "I am a jealous God; and there is not another God beside me," a conflation of Exodus 20:5 and Isaiah 45:5.¹¹⁷ The biblical text makes the claims, and the authors of the *Apocryphon* take them at face value.¹¹⁸ Two elements of this boast could be problematic to any thoughtful pagan in antiquity. First, jealousy is frequently enough thought to be an undesirable trait, and certainly not a divine one.¹¹⁹ Second, the implicit

¹¹⁷ NHC II 13,8-9 and pars.

¹¹⁸ Further, these claims are not rare in the LXX, they are a common trope and are found in key foundational texts (e.g., the Decalogue and the Pentateuch for Jewish circles, the prophet Isaiah for Christian communities). In other words, they are not obscure proof texts but fairly commonplace depictions of God. See, e.g., Gen 1:26; Exod 34:14; Deut 4:24, 35, 5:9, 6:15, 32:39; Josh 24:19; 1 Kings 8:60; Isa 44:8, 45 (*passim*), 46:9; Ezek 16:36-42, 36:6; Joel 2:27; Nah 1:2; 4 Macc 18:9.

¹¹⁹ Two points of clarification are in order. First, it should be noted that jealousy (πικρῶς) need not necessarily be understood as a negative trait (see, e.g., Crum, s.v.; Stumpff, "ζηλόω κτλ."), *TDNT* II:882-83). In the context of *Ap. John*, however, it is difficult to see how jealousy could be viewed positively. Most illustrative is II 18,18-24, "And the mother of them all (is) Esthensis-Ouch-Epi-Ptoe. From the four demons passions (πάθος) came forth. And from grief (λύπη) (came) envy, jealousy (οὔκω), distress, trouble, pain, callousness, anxiety, mourning, and so on." Other significant references include the following: II 10,30-31, Harmas, the fourth of the 12 evil authorities created by Ialdabaoth is called "the eye of envy (πῶλλ μπικρῶς)"; II 15,21, The sixth of seven powers involved in the creation of Adam is also called envy (πικρῶς; cf. Irenaeus comments on the Barbeloites in *Haer.* 1.29.4); and II 25,31, those of the immovable race will be free from anger, envy, jealousy, desire, and greed, among other vices.

Second, in popular religion gods to a certain degree exhibited human passions. Any number of episodes from Homer attests to the pervasive anthropopathy of the gods. As Hans Josef Klauck (*The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, trans. Brian McNeil [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003]), 28) writes, "In Homer the gods not only look like human beings; they also behave like them, loving, suffering, hating, and engaging in conflicts among themselves." It was the philosophers and the intellectual elites that took issue with such depictions of the gods. Thus the *Weltanschauung* of the *Apocryphon* is one that allows for the possibility of petty deities but is nonetheless critical of them.

monotheism of the latter claim poses a challenge to the general proclivities towards polytheism in Greco-Roman culture and religion.¹²⁰ Each will be discussed in turn.

“I am a jealous God”

The first statement of the creator, the admission that he is “jealous (πικῶς, probably a translation of ζήλωτής¹²¹),” is not explicitly criticized in the *Apocryphon*.

The problem is not so much that Ialdabaoth is jealous, but that his jealousy reveals his deceit. The text is clear: “But by announcing this he indicated to the angels who attended him that there exists another God. For if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?”¹²² Although the formal critique is of Ialdabaoth’s ignorance and self-

¹²⁰ See, e.g., Kleinknecht, “θεός,” *TDNT* III:65-79; *OCD*³, “Monotheism,” 994. While some trends towards monotheism are indeed present in the second and third centuries CE, the overall inclination is still towards polytheism. Everett Ferguson (*Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 176) writes, “The tendency to *monotheism* influenced the terminology of pagan authors but was seldom carried through consistently. The several influences contributing to the spread of a monotheistic view left room for lesser deities under the highest god so in reality the popular religion was able to continue” (italics original). John Barclay (*Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan [323 BCE – 117 CE]* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996], 432) argues that it was not so much the idea of monotheism that was problematic but exclusive cultic practice. He writes,

Zeus constituted, in a sense, an embarrassment and a temptation for Jews, for in the worship of this supreme God it was possible to find a Gentile parallel to Jewish monotheism. As we have seen, Aristéas has a Gentile reckon that what the Jews worship as God is what Greeks call Zeus (16), while Aristobulus, more cautiously, deletes the name of Zeus from his citation of Aratus, preferring to substitute ‘God’ (fragment 4). Other Gods, of course could be deemed ‘solo’ and ‘supreme’, and it was not always easy for Jews to retain a linguistic and conceptual distinction in their monotheism. Once again, what mattered was cultic practice, and since it was rare for non-Jews to restrict their worship to one cult, all could be castigated as ‘polytheists’ whatever they understood their worship to mean.

¹²¹ See Exod 20:5 (LXX). In the similarly phrased Exod 34:14, the Bohairic version of the LXX uses πικῶς to translate ζήλωτής.

¹²² NHC II 13,9-13. *Treat. Seth* 64,18-65,1 is similar to the *Apocryphon* in that the boast reveals Ialdabaoth’s ignorance, thus making him a “laughingstock (ἀχόοος).” Other Gnostic texts actually take issue with Ialdabaoth’s jealousy. According to *Hyp. Arch.* 90,6-10 and *Orig. World* 119,4-6 it was actually jealousy that led Ialdabaoth to forbid eating from the tree of knowledge. *Test. Truth* 47,14-48,7 calls the creator god a “malicious envier (οὐβέλκωνος ἡμεφθονιῆ [βόσκωνος φθόνος])” on account of the command not to eat and the subsequent expulsion from the garden. The author of *Test. Truth* goes on to mock the “great blindness” of early catholics “who read and they did not know him.” The text then lists a

contradiction, the suggestion that the creator god was jealous (and shamelessly admitted to such a passion) would certainly raise suspicions about that deity.¹²³ In the first place, feelings (i.e., passions) of jealousy (ζήλος) and envy (φθόνος) are often denigrated. They are so routinely condemned that the traits can simply appear without explanation in pagan, Jewish, and Christian vice lists.¹²⁴ Second, and perhaps more significantly, an infallible god would not exhibit passions generally, and certainly not one as distasteful as jealousy.¹²⁵ In *Phaedrus* 247A, Plato describes a blissful picture of heaven in which

catena of biblical texts that reveal the wickedness of the creator, including Exod 20:5 and Isaiah 45:5. Later, in the 4th century, Julian the so-called “Apostate” (361-63 CE) would likewise criticize the jealousy of the Christian god (see, e.g., *Contra Galilaeos* 93D-94A). His work is heavily influenced by Celsus and Porphyry, though his critique of a jealous god may have drawn upon previous Gnostic arguments. For further on Julian, see John Granger Cook, *The Interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (STAC 23; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004), 248-344.

¹²³ Origen, to take one example, to a certain extent agrees with those who would find God’s assertion in Exod 20:5 difficult. In *On First Principles* 4.2.1-2, Origen admits that this passage (and 10,000 others like it!) is knotty and concludes that the problem lies in the literal reading of the text. He finds his way around the offense of the text not by putting a positive spin on ζήλος but through an appeal to the need for an allegorical/spiritual reading.

¹²⁴ See, e.g., Lucian, *A Professor of Public Speaking* 22; *Didache* 3.1-10; Rom 13:13; 2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20. That jealousy would be found so frequently in vice lists is significant as these catalogues basically expressed conventional morality, i.e., transgressions that were universally accepted as such. For a brief discussion and bibliography catalogues of virtues and vices, see John Fitzgerald, “Virtue/Vice Lists,” in *ABD* IV:857-59.

¹²⁵ The creator god’s jealousy is especially troubling because it is so often connected to wrathful vengeance. See, e.g., Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 32:19. As historian Peter Lampe (*From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser, ed. Marshall Johnson [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003], 249) in his discussion of Marcion notes,

Whoever, as Marcion, reads the Old Testament as literal and true and does not engage in allegorical interpretation is not obliged to but *can* naturally push toward the thesis that the demiurge is zealous for war (holy war!), and inconstant, subject to emotions. The post-Old Testament tradition is also cognizant of a war-like god (e.g., 1QM). This topos is without a doubt in the tradition.

Lampe also cites Tertullian, *Marc.* 1.2, who outlines Marcion’s biblical exegesis of both the Old and (what would later become) the New Testaments that led to his theology of two gods. Celsus found the wrath of this god to be particularly distasteful, and Origen in his response does not approve of the action but argues that the biblical testimony uses anthropomorphisms to help the weak understand. For Origen’s full response, see Origen, *Contra Celsum* 4.71-73. For Origen’s explanation in a non-polemical work, see *Princ.* 2.4.4. Origen’s response is quite similar to and likely dependent upon Philo (see, e.g., *Deus* 60-69).

“There are many blessed sights and many ways hither and thither within the heaven, along which the blessed gods go to and fro attending each to his own duties; and whoever wishes, and is able, follows, for jealousy (φθόνος) is excluded from the celestial band.”¹²⁶ Aristotle tells us that “it is impossible for the Deity to be jealous (φθόνος).”¹²⁷ Celsus echoes these sentiments when he wonders why Christians cannot sacrifice to the gods: “God is surely common to all men. He is both good and in need of nothing, and without envy. What then prevents people particularly devoted to them from partaking of the public feasts?”¹²⁸ Roughly contemporary to the authors of the *Apocryphon* and sharing a similar ethos, the author of the *Gospel of Truth* (18,38-40) rhetorically wonders how there could possibly be jealousy (φθόνος) between the Highest God and the rest of the heavenly totality. With ideas such as these current and widespread, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the authors of the *Apocryphon*, well versed in Middle Platonic thinking and deeply informed by the contemporary ethos, simply read the text and naturally assumed it referred to a lesser deity. This assumption is natural because polytheism was the norm.

¹²⁶ In *Tim.* 29D-E, in spite of this text’s clear influence on the authors of the *Apocryphon*, Timaeus explains that the creator “was good, and in him that is good no envy (φθόνος) arises ever concerning anything; and being devoid of envy he desired that all should be, so far as possible, like unto himself. This principle, then, we shall be wholly right in accepting from men of wisdom as being above all the supreme originating principle of Becoming and the Cosmos.” (trans. Bury, LCL)

¹²⁷ *Met.* 983A. Although Aristotle acknowledges that the poets speak of jealous gods, he goes on to quote the proverb, “Poets tell many a lie.” This quote is probably best understood as a display of intellectual elitism on the part of Aristotle. Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 1.43, is more explicit in his critique of popular belief when he writes, “With the errors of the poets may be classed the monstrous doctrines of the magi and the insane mythology of Egypt, and also the popular beliefs, which are a mere mass of inconsistencies sprung from ignorance” (trans. Rackham, LCL).

¹²⁸ Apud Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.21 (trans. Chadwick, *Origen Contra Celsum*).

“There is not another God besides me”

In *Adversus haereses* 2.10.1, when Irenaeus criticizes the Gnostic appropriation of scripture, he asserts that they construct another god in an effort to explain ambiguous biblical texts.¹²⁹ He argues that there is no need for another god and that the Gnostics are simply creating another god “that was previously not sought after (*qui antea numquam quaesitus est*).” His argument is dubious on two counts. In the first place, he intimates that the Gnostics have distorted the scriptural text and read into it a multiplicity of gods.¹³⁰ This is simply not the case—in spite of the insistence of later biblical texts that there is only one God,¹³¹ the Hebrew Bible as a whole (and the Greek translation of it) is composite with multiple perspectives, and it is not uncommon to find texts that infer a divine plurality.¹³² Second, and perhaps more important, contrary to Irenaeus’ assertion, many did in fact “seek out” other gods: polytheism was the norm, not the exception.

¹²⁹ As further support of the previous argument, it is noteworthy that Irenaeus admits that the Gnostic dilemma is rooted in problems with the biblical text.

¹³⁰ Irenaeus, perhaps rather disingenuously, assures the reader that the texts are actually not ambiguous about the number of deities when he writes, “...*ambiguas autem non quasi ad alterum Deum, sed quasi ad dispositiones Dei*.” He thus creates a caricature of his opponents: they are simply creating out of thin air the idea of multiple gods and imposing them on the text. In actuality, Irenaeus (and other early catholics) is misreading the text to refer to a single God.

¹³¹ See, e.g., 1 Kings 8:56-61; 1 Chron 16:26; Psalm 95:5; Isa 44:8, 45 (*passim*); Dan 3:29; Joel 2:27. Later texts such as these deeply influenced Jewish exegetes such that monotheism became a distinguishing feature of Second Temple Judaism. On this, see Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 429-34; Elias Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 243; James D.G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991), 19-21 and *passim*.

¹³² Most relevant to the current discussion, is Genesis 1-3, to which the *Apocryphon* is deeply indebted and which implies a multiplicity of gods (see Gen 1:26, 3:5, and 3:22). Similarly, the Decalogue begins with the command, “You shall have no other gods besides me (οὐκ ἔσονται σοι θεοὶ ἕτεροι πλὴν ἐμοῦ)” (Exod 20:3 LXX), again suggesting that there are other gods to be found and had alongside the Jewish god. Shortly thereafter (Exod 20:5) the god’s jealousy is reiterated with reference to worshipping idols.

This tendency towards polytheism is evident in several ancient texts. Perhaps one of the clearest articulations of the contemptibility of monotheism comes from one of Irenaeus' near contemporaries, Apuleius. In his *Metamorphoses*, Apuleius describes the wife of a baker who was in general a good man.¹³³ His wife, however, was "the worst and by far the most depraved woman in the world."¹³⁴ Among her many despicable vices¹³⁵ is the fact that "she scorned and spurned all the gods in heaven, and, instead of holding a definite faith, she used the false sacrilegious presumption of a god, whom she would call 'one and only'..."¹³⁶ Although Apuleius' criticism is particularly poignant, he is not alone in his disparagement: popular condemnation of monotheism led many ancient authors to vilify Jews and early catholics for their atheism and impiety.¹³⁷ Tacitus complains that the first lesson that converts to Judaism learn is "to despise (*contemnere*) the gods."¹³⁸ The charge is so widespread (or at least perceived to be so) that several

¹³³ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 9.14.

¹³⁴ Ibid. (trans. Hanson, LCL).

¹³⁵ Apuleius' description is worth quoting in full: "That vile woman lacked not a single fault. Her soul was like some muddy latrine into which absolutely every vice had flowed. She was cruel and perverse, crazy for men and wine, headstrong and obstinate, grasping in her mean thefts and a spendthrift in her loathsome extravagances, an enemy of fidelity and a foe to chastity." (trans. Hanson, LCL)

¹³⁶ Ibid. (trans. Hanson, LCL).

¹³⁷ See, e.g., Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.148; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4, 5; Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96; Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 5-6; Lucian, *Alex.* 38; *Mart. Pol.* 12.2. For more examples and a helpful discussion, see Craig de Vos, "Popular Graeco-Roman Responses to Christianity," in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip Esler (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.869-89.

¹³⁸ Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5

Christian apologists (despite the acknowledgment of their belief in one God) defend against charges of atheism.¹³⁹

The polemical nature of the charges and counter-charges aside,¹⁴⁰ at present it is important to note that Jewish and early catholic monotheism is a peculiarity that was problematic to pagans. As Everett Ferguson notes, “Greco-Roman paganism was *nonexclusive*. Worship, even the giving of one’s own exclusive devotion to a deity, did not preclude the acknowledgement of other deities. The exclusive demands of Jews and Christians for their God were part of the scandal of these faiths to the pagans.”¹⁴¹ In a polytheistic context such as this, where many gods are the norm, and where those gods compete for supremacy, it would be entirely natural for a highly assimilated and acculturated¹⁴² Jew or early catholic (let alone a pagan) to read a text such as Exod 20:3 (“You shall have no other gods besides me”) and assume that the text is referring to multiple gods. The assumption would be exegetical in the literal sense of the term. The

¹³⁹ The three charges commonly refuted by Christian apologists are atheism, incest, and cannibalism. See, e.g., Justin Martyr, *I Apol.* 6; Tertullian, *Apol.* 10.1; Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 8. Athenagoras’ argument in *Legatio pro Christianis* is a response to the three claims of atheism, Oedipal intercourse, and Thyestean feasts (see esp. *Leg.* 3). The charge of atheism stems from the Christian insistence that there is one God. The charge of incest is likely the result the creation of fictive kin and the Christian value of ἀγάπη for one’s “brothers” and “sisters.” The accusation that Christians practiced cannibalism is no doubt related to Eucharistic practices (texts like John 6:48-60 make it clear how such a claim could arise). Christian practices also played naturally into a charge of infanticide, common in both Pagan and Christian polemics. See, e.g., *Did.* 5.2, *Ep. Barn.* 20.2, *Apoc. Pet.* 8, Athenagoras, *Leg.* 35.

¹⁴⁰ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 132, writes, “The counter charges of ‘atheism’ and ‘impiety’ are only what should be expected from Gentiles who found their multifarious religiosity categorically rejected.” King, *Secret Book*, 186, alludes to this conflict when she asserts that the *Apocryphon* “plays on the deep resentment some pagans felt toward Jewish exclusivity...” Note, however, that her point here is distinct from what I am trying to argue. She sees the *Apocryphon*’s presentation of Ialdabaoth as a form of pandering, rather than as a straightforward reading of texts that imply multiple gods.

¹⁴¹ Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 173 (italics original).

¹⁴² I borrow these categories from Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 92-98.

god's jealousy (described in Exod 20:5 and Isa 45:5), crude and unbecoming of a divine being, nonetheless fits in a polytheistic context wherein many gods compete for human loyalties. Again, this conclusion would be exegetical.¹⁴³

Summary

In this section I have shown how responsible *exegesis* of the biblical text could lead to Gnostic ideas about the creator god such as those we find in the *Apocryphon of John*. Far from value reversals or protest, there are many scriptural passages that the authors of the *Apocryphon* in their robust pluralistic context could have read and reasonably concluded that those biblical texts describe many gods, one of whom is jealous (and thus also wicked). That god also happens to be the creator whose ignorance is manifest throughout the creation story.¹⁴⁴ This position would surely have led to conflict with Jews and early catholics, but the disagreement is over the interpretation of the biblical text, not the usefulness of said text.

The *Apocryphon of John*'s Structural Dependence on the Biblical Text

The previous section argued that the authors of *Apocryphon* were dependent upon the scriptures in their development of foundational ideas. The task of the present section is to demonstrate how the *Apocryphon* is indebted to the biblical text at the structural level. A structural analysis reveals that the core of the *Apocryphon* is essentially a

¹⁴³ Gerard Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions*, 4, articulates just how such an exegesis may naturally occur when he writes, "Readers of religious and philosophical texts always face the task of integrating the information of the text with their own systems of values and with their own philosophies of life." In this case, a competitive polytheistic ethos is the system and the system is precognitive.

¹⁴⁴ This is a significant conclusion inasmuch as it suggests that one of the key (if not *the* key) distinctive Gnostic ideas, namely that of the wickedness of the demiurge, arose out of exegesis of the biblical text.

rewriting of Gen 1-4 that follows closely the biblical narrative. The close dependence of the *Apocryphon* on the book of Genesis is apparent both in the narrative arc and in the preservation of several distinct markers from the biblical text. Before examining this dependence, a brief sketch of the general structure of the *Apocryphon* is in order.

The Structure of the Apocryphon of John

There is general agreement on the broad outline of the *Apocryphon*.¹⁴⁵ The text opens (1,1-2,25) and closes (31,32-32,6)¹⁴⁶ with a brief narrative frame that places the entire narrative in the context of a dialogue between the John and the savior.¹⁴⁷ At the end of the opening frame, the savior puts forth the program for the rest of the revelatory dialogue when he declares, “I have come to teach you what is, what was, and what will come to be.”¹⁴⁸ The first section (2,26-9,24) describes “what is,” namely the entire non-physical (i.e., supersensible or spiritual) universe that emanates out of a solitary first principle, the Monad (μονός). The second section (9,25-25,16), “what was,” narrates the fall of Sophia and the subsequent creation of the physical realm. In this section, Sophia, one of the spiritual emanations, acts without the help of her consort and engenders a

¹⁴⁵ I have been most influenced by Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 13-17 and Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques*, 33-35. In what follows I will use the page and line numbers from NHC II, the parallel passages from BG and NHC III are implied.

¹⁴⁶ The last lines of the *Apocryphon* (32,8-10) contain the (perhaps secondary?) title and are not part of the frame story.

¹⁴⁷ On the distinctive features of Gnostic dialogues and how the *Apocryphon* compares, see Pheme Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 25-73.

¹⁴⁸ NHC II 2,16-18 and pars. Coptic: ΤΕΝΟΥ ΔΙΕΙ ΕΤΣΕΒΟΚ ΧΕ ΟΥ ΠΕΤΩΟΡΠ ΔΥΩ ΟΥ ΠΕΤΔΩΩΠΕ ΔΥΟ ΟΥ ΠΕΤΩΕ ΕΩΩΠΕ. This passage echoes very strongly Rev 1:4 and 8.

malformed, creaturely deity, Ialdabaoth. In the creation of the “abortion (2ΟΥ2Ε),”¹⁴⁹ Sophia also unwittingly imparts a “great power” (i.e., the divine power intended only for the aeons) that Ialdabaoth uses to create the psychic world in the likeness of the spiritual world (9,26-13,4). Upon completion of the psychic realm, Ialdabaoth then creates the material world (13,5-25,16). At this point, the *Apocryphon* becomes essentially a retelling of Genesis 2-4, rich with biblical language and imagery. Whereas Genesis 2-4 in its original context narrates the creation of the world (it is properly a cosmogony), in the *Apocryphon*, the account is appropriated soteriologically.¹⁵⁰ What functioned originally as an account of the beginning of the world is transformed into a combat narrative wherein the Barbelo and its cohorts seek to recover the stolen power while Ialdabaoth and his minions struggle to maintain control over said power.¹⁵¹ In the third and final section (25,16-30,11), John asks seven questions that the savior answers and in so doing explains “what will be.”¹⁵² This section contains a key interpretation of the flood (Gen 6-9), curiously followed by an account of the so-called “Watchers” (Gen 6:1-

¹⁴⁹ BG 46,10. NHC II 14,33 describes Ialdabaoth as a “garment of darkness (2ΒCΩ ΜΠΚΔΚΕ).” Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques*, 296, helpfully suggests that the translator of NHC II likely misread ἔκτρομα (abortion) as στρώμα (something spread out, such as a tunic or a garment).

¹⁵⁰ As will be shown, the authors are creative in their reworking but nonetheless follow the biblical chronology with only occasional divergences and when they quote Genesis, they follow the language of the LXX closely. It is also in this section that three of the four corrections to Moses occur. There is also the correction of the biblical account of the serpent without any reference to Moses.

¹⁵¹ This change in focus necessarily leads to a recasting of Moses’ account. Put simply, in this section Moses is “corrected” repeatedly without any external markers. It is curious then, that the three places in this section in which Moses is explicitly corrected, the change is minimal—given the freedom that the authors have with the text, the account could have been written without ever explicitly correcting Moses. For more on this, see chapter three, pp. 92-93.

¹⁵² It is likely significant that there are seven questions, perhaps again drawing on the many events that occur in sevens in Revelation.

4).¹⁵³ In both of these accounts, the *Apocryphon* is clearly indebted to the biblical text and common apocalyptic (especially Enochic) interpretations of it. A hymn recounting Pronoia's three attempts to rescue humankind concludes the dialogue in NHC II.¹⁵⁴

A Piece of Rewritten Scripture

In his 1988 article, "Use, Authority and Exegesis of Mikra in Gnostic Literature," Birger Pearson categorizes Gnostic literature according to three "hermeneutical presuppositions" with regards to the biblical text: "a wholly negative view," "a wholly positive view," and "intermediate positions."¹⁵⁵ Pearson does not locate the *Apocryphon* in any of these categories but instead creates a fourth category specifically for the *Apocryphon of John* and "related literature."¹⁵⁶ He notes that the closest analogies to the supposed *Urtext*¹⁵⁷ underlying the *Apocryphon* are Jewish pseudepigraphal writings such as *1 Enoch*, *Jubilees*, and the *Genesis Apocryphon*, texts that are typically classified as rewritten scripture.¹⁵⁸ Pearson suggests that this type of writing represents "the earliest

¹⁵³ Curious because the tale of the Watchers follows the flood. In Genesis and in all ancient interpretations of which I am aware the sin of the Watchers precedes—and often precipitates—the flood. As a result of this shift in the *Apocryphon*, the story no longer describes a primordial descent of angels but explains why evil continues to exist in the world.

¹⁵⁴ The hymn was likely omitted in BG and NHC III, rather than added by the redactors of NHC II. On this, see Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques*, 339-40.

¹⁵⁵ Pearson, "Mikra in Gnostic Literature," 638-46.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 647. Pearson discusses at length the *Apocryphon* and only mentions in passing *Hyp. Arch.*, *Orig. World*, *Apoc. Adam*, and *Par. Shem*.

¹⁵⁷ This is part of Pearson's larger program to show the Jewish background of the Gnostic religion generally and the *Apocryphon* specifically. As I noted above in chapter one, the problem with his approach is that he does not deal adequately with the text as it survives. It is not just the alleged *Urtext* that can be classified as rewritten scripture but the entire extant text of the *Apocryphon*.

¹⁵⁸ Pearson, "Mikra in Gnostic Literature," 649. For a more thorough treatment of this genre, see chapter four below, 135-39.

stage of Gnostic literary production,” and that the *Apocryphon*, like its Jewish pseudepigraphal counterparts, expands and rewrites Genesis to put forth an alternative interpretation of the biblical text.¹⁵⁹

Pearson’s characterization of the *Apocryphon* is helpful. What is lacking in his analysis is the data that supports identifying the text as rewritten scripture, and there is much to be found. Two pieces of evidence will be presently examined: 1) the broad structure of the *Apocryphon* and the biblical markers that dictate its flow and 2) the order of direct quotes and verbal echoes from the Genesis 1-7. Both features underscore the foundational importance of the biblical text in the composition of the *Apocryphon*.

“Books of generations”

The middle section of the *Apocryphon* (9,25-25,16) most clearly resembles rewritten scripture. It closely follows the arc of the biblical narrative and frequently cites passages from Genesis 1-7. As Michel Tardieu has noted, the parameters of the section are identical to the biblical parameters set by the *Toledoth* formulae in the book of Genesis.¹⁶⁰ The first instance of a *Toledoth* formula occurs in Gen 2:4, once the first account of creation is complete. Likewise, the first section of the *Apocryphon* concludes

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques*, 31. For a brief discussion of the *Toledoth* formulae, see Norman Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 66-67. At key points in the biblical narrative, the Priestly editors of the book of Genesis organized the content by adding genealogies that begin with some variation of the phrase, “אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת” or “זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת” (“this/these are the [book of the] generations of”). The LXX maintains the structural cue with the phrase, “αὕτη ἡ βίβλος γενέσεως.” The pattern is followed in the NT in Matt 1:1, which opens with the phrase, “βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ,” before giving Jesus genealogy.

once the creation of the supersensible world is complete (9,24).¹⁶¹ The second *Toledoth* formula occurs in Gen 5:1, after the birth of Seth. Again, the *Apocryphon* follows Genesis and shifts to the third section after Seth (the son “according to his image and likeness [κατὰ τὴν ἰδέαν αὐτοῦ καὶ κατὰ τὴν εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ],” Gen 5:4 LXX) is born of a union between Adam and Foreknowledge (NHC II 25,16; cf. BG 63,13; NHC III 32:6-7).

This broad structural agreement is significant. It shows that the authors read closely and worked to follow the Genesis account. Further, it places the whole of the *Apocryphon*, not just the middle section, in close alignment to the entire primordial history of Genesis 1-11. This structural alignment betrays the entire *Apocryphon*’s deep dependence on the biblical text, and its genre as rewritten scripture.

Verbatim clues

In an important early article on the *Apocryphon* and Genesis, Søren Giversen provided a fairly exhaustive list of 15 passages in the *Apocryphon* that had clear verbal associations with Gen 1-7, “omitting passages that merely recount the events as in Genesis without any actual resemblance in wording....”¹⁶² As Giversen notes, the list is

¹⁶¹ Philosophically minded Hellenistic Jews such as Philo of Alexandria had long before the *Apocryphon* understood Gen 1-3 to narrate two creation stories, the first of the heavenly Adam (Gen 1:1-2:4) and the second of the earthly Adam (Gen 2:4-25). The authors of the *Apocryphon* use those traditions in the writing of their narrative. For more on this, see Thomas Tobin, *The Creation of Man: Philo and the History of Interpretation* (CBQMS 14; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association, 1983), esp. pp. 102-34.

¹⁶² Giversen, “The *Apocryphon of John* and Genesis,” 66-67. The list is reproduced here (note that the page and line references are to BG):

Genesis	The <i>Apocryphon of John</i> in BG
i 2	45,1.7.10.19
i 26	48,10-14
ii 9	57,8-11
ii 15-16; iii 23-24	56,1-10

remarkable in that it shows just how frequently the authors of the *Apocryphon* felt it necessary to cite the Genesis account.¹⁶³ What Giversen did not draw attention to, but is equally significant, is the extent to which the order of the direct quotes basically corresponds to the order in which they are found in Genesis.¹⁶⁴ In short, the authors of the *Apocryphon* closely follow the biblical narrative, even when they are not directly quoting it. They may paraphrase the story, but the direct quotes show that they have an eye to events as narrated in the text, in the order that they occur. The verbatim citations provide markers that draw attention to the way in which the structure of the *Apocryphon* is derived from the biblical text. Moreover, it shows how conservative the authors of the *Apocryphon* were in their treatment of the scriptures.

Exegetical “Proofs”

The final way in which the *Apocryphon* demonstrates its fundamental dependence upon and respect for the biblical text is through exegetical “proofs.” There are a few

ii 17	57,12-13
ii 21	58,17-18
ii 21-22	59,18-19
ii 24	60,7-11
iii 16	61,11-12
iii 23	61,19-62,1
iv 25	63,12-14
vi 1-4	74,1-5
vi 6	72,12-14
vi 17	72,14-17
vii 7	73,5-6

¹⁶³ Ibid., 67.

¹⁶⁴ Of the 15, only two are out of order, Gen 2:15-16; 3:23-24 precedes the direct quote of Gen 2:9 and Gen 6:6, 6:17, and 7:7 all precede Gen 6:1-4. The former is really only a single word (τρυφή) and may be as much influenced by Ezek 28:13 and 31:8-9 as Genesis. The second is a significant shift, and as discussed above (pp.76-78) is necessary for the *Apocryphon*’s narrative arc. Aside from these two passages, the authors of the *Apocryphon* are incredibly conservative in their preservation of the original order.

points where there are allusions to the biblical text even though the context does not necessarily demand it.¹⁶⁵ These odd insertions of the biblical text are significant—they reveal a desire and an effort on the part of the authors of the *Apocryphon* to let the biblical text speak. The appeal to the scriptures in surprising places suggests that they had an authority and their mere presence helped the authors of the *Apocryphon* prove their point. The use is not protreptic, but simply a turn to the text. In this section I will discuss three such texts: the in-blowing of the divine spirit (NHC II 19,23-28 and pars.), Adam's exclamation (NHC II 23,10-16 and pars.), and Ialdabaoth's repentance (NHC II 28,32-34 and pars.).

The "Breath of Life" (NHC II 19,23-28 and pars.)

As noted above, the Genesis account of creation is rewritten in the *Apocryphon* as a cosmic struggle (a combat myth) over the divine power that Ialdabaoth stole from Sophia.¹⁶⁶ It is clear from the start that the battle is over a divine light or spark.¹⁶⁷ The power is not located in the breath, it is an object that can be taken (NHC II 10,20-21 and pars.), sent forth (NHC 11,7-15), possessed (NHC II 12,6-9 and pars.), clothed, (NHC II 21,11 and pars.) and so on. The *Hypostasis of the Archons* makes this clear in its use of Genesis at this point. Upon molding the man out of the earth, the Ialdabaoth proceeds to

¹⁶⁵ See, e.g., NHC II 14,26-15,6 and pars., the creation of a man according to the image reflected in the waters and NHC II 24,15-25, the introduction of Cain and Abel into the narrative.

¹⁶⁶ See above, p. 77.

¹⁶⁷ This is especially the case in NHC II, argued cogently by Bernard Barc and Louis Painchaud, "La réécriture de l'Apocryphon de Jean à la lumière de l'hymne final de la version longue," *Le Muséon* 112 (1999): 317-33.

breathe on his face, imparting a soul.¹⁶⁸ The rulers could not, however, make him fully animate. In a rather comic scene,

[T]he man came to have a soul (and remained) upon the ground many days. But they could not make him arise because of their powerlessness. Like storm winds they persisted (in blowing), that they might try to capture that image, which had appeared to them in the waters. And they did not know the identity of its power.¹⁶⁹

In this text, it is explicit that in the breath has nothing to do with the stolen power. It is only after the spirit comes forth that Adam “became a living soul.”¹⁷⁰

The *Apocryphon*, which, like *Hyp. Arch.*, has been explicit about the nature of the power, uses the biblical text in spite of the difficulties it presented to the narrative. It does so through a creative reinterpretation of the “breath of life (πνοὴ ζωῆς).” The authors of the *Apocryphon* make a hermeneutical move of equating πνοή with πνεῦμα.¹⁷¹ In so doing, the power (i.e., πνεῦμα) that comes from the mother (Zoe) can be passed to humankind.

Flesh of My Flesh! (NHC II 23,10-16 and pars.)

In the account of the creation of the woman in Genesis, when Adam sees the woman for the first time he expresses with joy, “This at last is bone of my bones and

¹⁶⁸ *Hyp. Arch.* 88,3-5.

¹⁶⁹ *Hyp. Arch.* 88,3-10 (trans. Layton, *NHL*).

¹⁷⁰ *Hyp. Arch.* 88,10-15 (trans. Layton, *NHL*)

¹⁷¹ This is not an entirely unique move. A century earlier Philo of Alexandria already conflated the two. See, e.g., *Opif.* 134; *Leg.* 1.31, 33.

flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”¹⁷²

The *Apocryphon* of John is the only text from Nag Hammadi to quote this verse verbatim.¹⁷³ The verse has a few echoes throughout the Nag Hammadi corpus, especially in texts that refer to the original monadic ideal.¹⁷⁴ The *Apocryphon* and *Exeg. Soul* are unique in that these are the only two texts that cite or allude to Gen 2:21 and refer to the flesh (σάρξ). In general, the idea of two-becoming-one, which is typically idealized as androgyny or solitariness, while common in Gnostic thought, rarely used Gen 2:21 as a proof or defense of the concept. When Gen 2:21 is referenced, σάρξ is only mentioned twice, as it makes the spiritualizing interpretation problematic.

In the present passage, the use of σάρξ is especially odd. Since Adam is looking upon the divine Epinoia of the light, it does not follow that he would identify her as bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh, for she is neither.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, this reference to the flesh is somewhat surprising, given that the *Apocryphon* otherwise only refers to the flesh in negative terms.¹⁷⁶ In NHC II 16,28, the demon Entholleia is said to have created all the flesh. In NHC II 20,25-13 (and pars.), body which originates in matter (ύλη) is called

¹⁷² Trans. NRSV. In Gen 2 God can sometimes appear to be improvising or ad-libbing. It is not surprising that Adam rejoices at seeing the woman after his first choices for companionship were the animals God created (see Gen 2:18-20).

¹⁷³ Craig Evans, Robert L. Webb, and Richard A. Wiebe, eds. *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: A Synopsis and Index* (New Testament Tools and Studies 18; Leiden: Brill, 1993).

¹⁷⁴ See, e.g., *Gos. Thom.* 11; *Exeg. Soul* 132,27-133,10; *Soph. Jes. Chr.* 111,1-3

¹⁷⁵ The authors of the *Apocryphon* seem to be aware of this problem when they omit the second half of Gen 2:21, “...this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” It is possible, however, that the term flesh is not taken strictly literally, as in, for example, Eph 5:23

¹⁷⁶ Likewise, the reference to the bones is surprising in NHC II, which appears to take issue with Moses’ assertion that Ialdabaoth used Adam’s rib. Instead, the savior corrects Moses, suggesting that what was really stolen was the light power that resided in Adam. For further, see chapter three, pp. 107-11.

a tomb. In the final dialogue consisting of seven questions, when John asks about the fate of the souls of those who are “brought safely into the light,” the savior responds, “They are not affected by anything, except the state of being in the flesh (σάρξ), which they bear (φορεῖν) while looking expectantly...”¹⁷⁷

In sum, the citation of Gen 2:21 does not precisely fit the context or the theology of the *Apocryphon*. Yet, because the authors and users of the text found the Bible authoritative, they therefore appealed to its authority as they described the creation of the woman.

The Repentance of God (NHC II 28,32-34 and pars.)

The Biblical flood narrative is recounted in the seventh and final question that John asks the savior in the concluding dialogue section of the *Apocryphon*. After the savior explains the origins and power of “bitter Fate (CΔΩΕ ΝΤΩΙΜΔΡΜΕΝΗ; NHC II 28,14),” he proceeds to report how Ialdabaoth repented (ᾤτλη) of all he had done and plotted to bring a flood on all humanity.¹⁷⁸ The oddity of God’s repentance in the original context of Gen 6:6 was discussed above at length.¹⁷⁹ The notion works well in the theology of the *Apocryphon*, as Ialdabaoth is understood to be petty and full of *pathos*. The present difficulty arises not from the idea of Ialdabaoth repenting (it is fully

¹⁷⁷ NHC II 25,33-35 and pars. See also NHC 26,25 and pars., on the leaving of the flesh behind to dwell in the light.

¹⁷⁸ Curiously, Philo, *Q.G.* 1.100, likewise uses the occasion of the flood to introduce a discussion of fate.

¹⁷⁹ See above, pp. 57-58.

expected in the *Apocryphon*) but from where the passage from Genesis is placed in the context of the *Apocryphon*.

Since the savior has just finished describing Ialdabaoth's final ruse, namely subjecting humankind to Fate, who is the "hardest and strongest" of the fetters. From her arise "every sin and injustice and blasphemy and the chain of forgetfulness and ignorance and every severe command with serious sins and great fears."¹⁸⁰ She has made the whole creation blind, so that they cannot know God.¹⁸¹ In a final declaration of her total power, the savior declares that she is "lord of everything (ΝΧΟΕΙC ΔΧΜ ΠΤΗΡC)." ¹⁸² It would appear at this point that Ialdabaoth has the upper hand and has finally won the cosmic battle. It is thus a fairly abrupt shift when the savior immediately mentions Ialdabaoth's repentance to segue to the narrative of the flood.¹⁸³

This odd inclusion is again suggestive. The author of the *Apocryphon* at this point is drawing upon the Biblical narrative of the flood which is introduced with God's repentance. The author found this detail in the scriptural text authoritative and thus included it in his narrative, in spite of the difficulties it introduced.

¹⁸⁰ NHC II 28,22-26 (trans. Waldstein and Wisse, *Synopsis*).

¹⁸¹ NHC II 28,27-28. The Coptic reads, ΔΥΩ ΤΑΙ ΤΕ ΘΕ ΕΝΤΑΥΤ<P>ΕΤΚΤΙCΙC ΤΗΡC Π ΒΛΛΗ ΧΕΚΔΔC ΠΝΟΥCΟΥΠ ΠΝΟΥΤΕ ("And in this way all of creation was made blind in order that they may not know God."), perhaps echoing 2 Cor 4:4.

¹⁸² NHC II 28,32. At this point NHC II is much more laconic. BG 72,11-12/NHC III 37,13-14 describe how Fate is lord over all beings, gods, demons, and human beings and offers commentary, calling the idea perverse and unjust.

¹⁸³ Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques*, 336, suggests that the switching of the order of the flood and the episode with the "sons of God" (in the *Apocryphon* the flood precedes the mixing of angels and humans) removed the impetus for the flood. Ialdabaoth's repentance thus serves to provide the rationale for the cataclysm. This does not seem to adequately address the problem, as it has been argued in this section that there is no need for Ialdabaoth to repent either.

Summary of Findings

This section began with Michael Williams' suggestion that the germ of key Gnostic ideas is not to be found in an external circumstance or event. Rather, the biblical text itself provided the basis for Gnostic theology, cosmology, and anthropology. This appears to be the case in the *Apocryphon of John*. First, the theology of the *Apocryphon*, particularly in its understanding of the demiurge, Ialdabaoth, is deeply indebted to biblical descriptions of God. In a polytheistic context, wherein many gods is the norm, passages that speak of multiple gods would naturally be read at face value. Texts such as Gen 1:27 or Exod 20:3 are really only problematic to monotheists. Likewise, texts that depict a "jealous" god, such as Exod 20:5 or Isa 45, would naturally reflect poorly on such a god, leading to derision. Second, the structure of the *Apocryphon*, as a clear case of rewritten scripture, is essentially derived from Gen 1-7. The authors read (and quoted) the biblical text carefully and were guided by the *Toledoth* formulae. Third, and finally, the authors of the *Apocryphon*, using contemporary exegetical tools and traditions, carefully interpreted specific biblical texts, even when those texts did not fit exactly into the narrative. This suggests a particular appreciation for scriptures, and a desire to have them inform their narrative.

Conclusion

The *Apocryphon of John* treats the biblical text with ambivalence. On the one hand, it is dependent upon the primordial history described in Genesis 1-11, while on the other it is explicit in its critique of Moses. This chapter explored the fundamental dependence of the *Apocryphon* on the biblical text. The first part of the chapter argued

that the common assertions that the authors rejected the biblical text or intentionally misread it are unfounded. Rather, a close read reveals that the value reversals are inconsistent and often as a result of an attempt to deal with difficult texts about which there was no agreed upon meaning. Where criticism is present, it is not directed toward the text but the god that the text depicts. The second half of the chapter examined the ways in which the authors of the *Apocryphon* were clearly indebted to (and thus found authoritative) the biblical account of creation. This reliance on the biblical text is evident at three levels: 1) theological, especially in their understanding of the creator god, Ialdabaoth; 2) structural, as “rewritten scripture,” as evidenced in their use of the biblical toledoth formulae and direct quotes; and 3) exegetical, in the close read of biblical texts, even when those texts present problems to their positions. The next chapter will now explore the other side of the *Apocryphon*’s ambivalence—the very real critique of Moses and his account.

CHAPTER THREE

“NOT AS MOSES SAID”

Introduction

The previous chapter argued that the *Apocryphon of John* is fundamentally indebted to the biblical text. It further argued that this indebtedness suggests a general affirmation of the biblical account of creation. As was evident, in many cases the authors of the *Apocryphon* offered somewhat conventional interpretations. This chapter aims to explore what at first glance appears to be an opposite process, namely the *Apocryphon*'s explicitly critical stance towards the Bible, especially the books of Moses.¹ Although the *Apocryphon* is interpreting the biblical narrative, in its final form the text never explicitly affirms Moses or his books; whenever Moses is mentioned by name, his account is depicted as flawed. The use of overt criticism in the absence of unequivocal affirmation carries considerable rhetorical force. As will be seen, the unambiguous disagreements with Moses challenge some of the conclusions of the previous chapter. That said, however, a close examination of the relevant passages reveals incongruity in the corrections themselves—in spite of the presence of a hyperbolic rhetoric of suspicion, the

¹ This point presents a challenge to the argument in chapter three that the authors of the text find the Bible authoritative and trustworthy and are merely using a different hermeneutic through which to read the text. This problem will be fully addressed below in chapter four. At present, it is useful to distinguish between the earliest compositional phases (described primarily in chapter two) and the rhetorical effect of later accretions (described in this chapter).

criticism is in many ways superficial. The tension is again apparent: the *Apocryphon of John* is both indebted to and critical of scripture.

Moses the Unreliable Witness

As discussed above in chapter two, the authors of *Ap. John* explicitly correct the Genesis account five times, four times mentioning Moses by name.² In each passage, the savior provides the “correct,” that is, Gnostic, version of events in response to a question from John. Before delving into the actual corrections, it will prove useful to explore first the way in which the correction is introduced, as the introductory descriptors offer a glimpse into the attitude of the savior to the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

The Rhetoric of Citation

Scholars generally agree that Plato, the Pentateuch, Jewish wisdom literature, and the Gospel of John all have exercised considerable influence on the narrative and theology of *Ap. John*.³ As noted in the previous chapter, the second and third sections of the *Apocryphon* are particularly indebted to Gen 1-7. This is no thanks to the authors, on account of their reticence to cite their sources. Søren Giversen, citing Wilhelm Kroll, suggests that the authors of *Ap. John* are engaged in “something common in the literary world of that day, namely the insertion of phrases, hidden quotations, or merely reminisces of familiar sentences taken from wellknown [*sic*] works, without any express

² See above, chapter two, p. 49. To reiterate, the four corrections of Moses are BG 45,7-19//II 13,19-26 (on the Spirit’s going to and fro ‘above the waters’); III 29,4-7//BG 58,16-59,1//II 22,22-25 (on the nature of Adam’s trance); III 29,21-24//BG 59,17-19//II 23,3-4 (on the creation of the woman from Adam’s rib); and III 37,22-38,5//BG 73,4-12//II 29,6-12 (on the hiding place of Noah). The Genesis account is corrected without reference to Moses in III 28,16-23//BG 57,20-58,7//II 22,9-16 (on the role of the serpent in the temptation of Adam).

³ The *Apocryphon* is also deeply influenced by the Book of Revelation and is aware of the Psalms and Paul.

indication that they were quotations or references to the works of others.”⁴ This suggestion certainly makes sense. Yet, what would constitute a familiar or “well known” text to the readers and hearers of the *Apocryphon of John*? This is a crucial question, for only those who were familiar with Moses’ account would have been able to identify the source of the material.⁵

The problem arises because the *Apocryphon* formally cites only three sources: the so-called Book of Zoroaster in NHC II 19,9-10, “the prophet” (Isaiah) in NHC II 22,25-26//BG 59,1-2, and Moses. While the Book of Zoroaster and “the prophet” are cited as reliable witnesses, Moses is only cited to point out his error. This practice of citing Moses only at points of disagreement has a powerful rhetorical effect. By the end of the document, after Moses has only been declared unreliable, one is left with the impression that he never gets it right.⁶ One episode illustrates this particularly well. When John asks the savior about the nature of Adam’s trance in NHC II 22,20-24, the savior replies,

⁴ Søren Giversen, “The Apocryphon of John and Genesis,” *Studia Theologica* 17 (1963): 60-76, here, 66. Giversen cites Wilhelm Kroll, *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1928; repr. New York: Garland, 1978), 139ff. See also Karen King, *Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2006), 189.

⁵ The situation with similar Jewish texts is perhaps clearer: because the Jewish authors affirmed the scriptures they invited the audience to make connections. For example, in *Jubilees* 1.7 and 26, Moses is commanded to write down everything that God tells him so that there will be a witness against the people when they transgress the covenant. From the start, then, Moses’ books are inspired by a mandate from God. Then, in 1.27 an angel of the presence is commanded to write the story of creation for Moses. Although the ensuing account expands and interprets Gen 1-3, it nonetheless appeals to the story “as it was written” (see, e.g., 2.1, 3.10, 14, 31; 4.5). The theological claims in *Jubilees* are authorized by the scriptural text. Although the biblical account is “rewritten,” the scriptural text is not replaced. Rather, the text is affirmed as divine writ and *Jubilees* merely provides the correct interpretation. For more on this, see Bruce Fisk, “Rewritten Bible in Pseudepigrapha and Qumran,” in *DNTB*, 947-53.

⁶ The *Apocryphon* is equally critical of Plato’s *Timaeus* but the reader does not get that impression because Plato is never directly refuted. Plotinus’ refutation of Gnostics in *Ennead* 2.9 shows how Neoplatonists found Gnostic ideas threatening. On the *Apocryphon*’s relationship to Plato, see the recent monograph by Zlatko Pleše, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe: Narrative and Cosmology in the Apocryphon of John* (NHMS 52; Leiden: Brill, 2006).

“It is not as Moses wrote and you heard. For he said in his first book, ‘He put him to sleep.’”⁷ It is as if Moses’ work is being introduced into this episode for the first time, “For he said in his first book...” Thus, the biblical episodes that preceded the formal citation (such as the Chief Ruler casting a trance on Adam) are depicted as coming from a source other than Moses. The result is that Moses cannot be credited for the part he correctly narrated (namely, the casting of a trance on Adam) but only for his mistake.

Moreover, in the citation of Moses, the authors of the *Apocryphon* move away from their usual hermeneutical strategy. Throughout *Ap. John*, Moses’ account is followed, even if the interpretations are somewhat surprising to modern readers. For example, the *Apocryphon* accepts that there were two trees in Paradise, one of life and one of knowledge (NHC II 21,19-22,9 and pars.). The evaluation of those trees, however, is reversed.⁸ The tree of life is really “an incurable poison,” whose “root is bitter and its branches are death, its shadow is hate and deception is in its leaves, and its blossom is the ointment of evil and its fruit is death” (NHC II 21,23-34), while the tree of knowledge allows Adam to “look up to his perfection and recognize the nakedness of his shamefulness” (NHC II 22,7-8).⁹ In short, the authors without mentioning him by name offer a correction of Moses without mentioning him by name. Several more examples of this hermeneutical strategy could be adduced—this is the standard *modus operandi* of the

⁷ Cf. BG 58,16-18.

⁸ This alternative evaluation of the trees is not unique to the *Apocryphon of John*, or to Gnostics in general. *1 Enoch*, for example, is ambiguous in its assessment of the tree that brings knowledge: “...and I saw from afar... the tree of wisdom, whose fruit the holy ones eat and learn great wisdom... That tree is... very cheerful; and its fragrance penetrates far beyond the tree” (*1 En.* 32.3-4; trans. Nickelsburg).

⁹ Note that the interpretation is not a complete reversal—the value of the idea of nakedness is consonant with the biblical account, only reinterpreted in the Gnostic framework.

authors.¹⁰ Given that alternative interpretations are the norm throughout the book, why then does Moses need to be explicitly corrected? If the meaning of the text is so flexible that the meaning can be reversed without explanation, could not Moses ostensibly be correct all the time? The explicit rejection of Moses guarantees that such is not the case. These overt refutations may also provide the lens through which to read the other, implicit corrections.

Framing the Rejection: The Savior Laughs

In three episodes, the savior laughs before offering the correct version of events. In the first improvement to Moses' account,¹¹ the savior laughs (Cⲱⲃⲉ) in both BG and NHC II (NHC III has a lacuna at this point). In all three manuscripts, the savior also laughs (Cⲱⲃⲉ) before elucidating the serpent's true role in the corruption of humankind.¹² In NHC III alone, the savior laughs (Cⲱⲃⲉ) before explaining the 'trance' cast upon Adam.¹³ The verb is usually translated as "smile,"¹⁴ with exegetes describing

¹⁰ I note here just a few: 1. The hortative, "Let us create a man according to the image of God..." (II 15,1-3 and pars.); 2. The "forming" of Adam (BG 48,16-17//III 22,8-9; and again in II 20,35-21,13 and pars.); 3. The breathing of the spirit into Adam (II 19,23-27 and pars.); and 4. Adam's exclamation when he sees the woman (II 23,10-14 and pars.). Ioan Couliano (*The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, trans. H. S. Wiesner [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992], 124-27) offers a persuasive account of how this interpretive strategy may have arisen in Gnostic circles.

¹¹ NHC II 13,19-26//BG 45,7-19.

¹² NHC II 22,9-16//BG 57,20-58,7//NHC III 28,16-23.

¹³ NHC III 29,4-7.

¹⁴ See *ad loc.*, e.g., Giversen, *Apocryphon Johannis*; King, *Secret Revelation*; Krause, "Apocryphon"; Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques*; Till, *Gnostischen Schriften*; Waldstein, *Nag Hammadi Deutsch*; Waldstein and Wisse, *Synopsis*; Wisse, *Nag Hammadi Library in English*. Of the texts that I consulted, only Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* and Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures* translate Cⲱⲃⲉ as "laugh."

the smile as that of a “benevolent”¹⁵ or “friendly”¹⁶ teacher. There is reason to suspect, however, that the savior’s smile is not entirely benign.

The first problem with such an interpretation is lexical. The semantic range of the word $\sigma\omega\epsilon$ varies from “to laugh” or “to play” (intransitive) to the more spiteful “to deride” or “to mock” (transitive).¹⁷ It typically is used to translate the Greek words $\gamma\epsilon\lambda\acute{\alpha}\omega$ (to laugh),¹⁸ $\mu\epsilon\iota\delta\acute{\iota}\omega$ (to smile),¹⁹ $\pi\alpha\acute{\iota}\zeta\omega$ (to play or to jest),²⁰ and $\chi\lambda\epsilon\upsilon\acute{\alpha}\zeta\omega$ (to mock, scoff).²¹ More telling is that $\sigma\omega\epsilon$ is exclusively used to translate the more

¹⁵ Pleše, *Poetics*, 234: “The Savior’s reaction is a commonplace in contemporary *Offenbarungsvisionen*—an omniscient teacher smiles benevolently, albeit slightly ironically, at his pupil’s confusion, and then modifies or flatly rejects his erroneous belief.” He cites *Jos. Asen.* 16.7, *Hermas, Vis.* 3.8.2, and *Korē Kosmou* 23.10 as examples. In both *Jos. Asen.* and *Hermas*, glosses make it clear that the revealer is smiling benevolently, a feature absent in *Ap. John*. *Korē Kosmou* is not a revelation scene; it is a meeting between the gods (and I wonder if the smile is simply that of a benevolent teacher).

¹⁶ Giversen, *Apocryphon Johannis*, 259, simply asserts, “The revealed saviour is constantly the friendly teacher, who with a smile—which expresses patience rather than superior knowledge, frees John from delusions...”

¹⁷ Crum, s.v. According to the English index, the typical word for smile is $\text{NOY}\tau\eta$, which is usually used to translate the Greek word $\mu\epsilon\iota\delta\acute{\iota}\omega$.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Gen 18:12-15, Sarah’s laughter at the prospect of bearing a child in her old age; Luke 6:25, woes on those who laugh now. Note that Crum identifies both of these instances as intransitive, i.e., “to laugh, play.” Both, however, can be easily understood in terms of scoffing or mockery.

¹⁹ LSJ, s.v. This is closest to the frequent English translation I am arguing against. It should be noted, however, that Crum cites only one occurrence: Lagarde, *Aegyptiaca*, 248. Crum reports that this text is a Coptic translation of a Greek text (and that $\sigma\omega\epsilon$ in the passage is a translation of $\mu\epsilon\iota\delta\acute{\iota}\omega$), though I have not yet been able to find the original Greek work (the Latin title of the work given by Lagarde is *Canones ecclesiastici*). In the passage it is clear that the “smile” has a subversive element. John tells the apostles that Jesus never shared the bread and the cup with women. Mary smiles ($\sigma\omega\epsilon$) and Martha feels compelled to explain why. Mary in her own defense then explains how she smiled ($\sigma\omega\epsilon$) because she remembered how Jesus taught that the weak would save the strong. In this interaction, then, it appears that power dynamics are at work—Mary’s smile is not benign, nor is it understood to be.

²⁰ See, e.g., Exod 32:6, the revelry during the golden calf incident; Prov 26:19, the dangers of a deceptive friend who says “I was only joking!”; and 1 Cor 10:7, a citation of Exod 32:6.

²¹ See, e.g., Acts 17:32, some in Paul’s audience scoff at the idea of a resurrection of the dead, translated in the Bohairic by $\sigma\omega\epsilon$, but in the Sahidic by $\text{NO}\sigma\text{NE}\sigma$. In this citation, Crum again understands the usage to be intransitive, and the laughter in this case is clearly derisive.

intensive, mocking forms of these verbs: ἐγγελάω, καταγελάω, προσγελάω, διαπαίζω, ἐγκαταπαίζω, καταπαίζω, and προσπαίζω, to list a few.²²

The definition of the word thus possesses an “intrinsic ambiguity,” or perhaps more precisely, a certain “volatility in nature.”²³ This lexical ambiguity or volatility may be due to the nature of humor and laughter in the Greek world. In a society where honor and shame operate as a form of currency, laughter can be particularly dangerous, especially when it is used to assault someone’s status.²⁴ Understood in this light, the interpretation of CΩΒΕ as a friendly smile would appear to be much too mild.²⁵

²² See the Greek index in Crum, s.vv. ἐμπαίζω, “to mock,” which is not exclusively translated as CΩΒΕ, though it does occur frequently. Note also that χλευάζω is usually translated as ΝΟΘΝΕΘ (see n. 21 above).

I should also include the following caveat: in the introduction to *A Coptic Dictionary*, vii, Crum warns against reading too much into the Greek words that underlie the Coptic. He writes, “The addition of the dialectical equivalent, in literary texts as well as biblical, is perhaps less valuable than at first appeared; divergence in detail between the Bible versions—far more frequent than has usually been admitted—and still wider differences between the versions, even within a single dialect, of other texts, tend to lessen the significance of apparent equivalents.”

²³ I borrow these terms from Stephen Halliwell, “The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture,” *CQ* 41 (1991): 279-96, here 284.

²⁴ Ibid., 285. Social scientific interpreters of the New Testament have identified honor and shame as the fundamental value of ancient persons. Jerome Neyrey (*Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 3-4) can thus declare, “It is becoming an accepted fact that honor and shame were pivotal values in antiquity that structured the daily lives of peoples around the Mediterranean, including Jesus and his disciples.” Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh (*Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 76) even more confidently assert, “...the pivotal value of the Mediterranean society of the first century was honor-shame.” For further, see, e.g., Halvor Moxnes, “Honor and Shame,” in *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Richard Rohrbaugh (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 19-40 and Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, “Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 25-65.

²⁵ I find discussions of the savior’s laughter in other texts, e.g., the *Gospel of Judas*, to be wanting as well. The jovial, friendly laughter proposed by Marvin Meyer (“Introduction,” in *The Gospel of Judas* [Washington D.C.: National Geographic, 2006], 4) is a bit forced given the biting criticism inherent in the episodes. See, e.g., *Gos. Jud.* 34,2-10, 36,23-15, and 55,12-20.

The use of Ⲫⲱⲃⲉ in the Nag Hammadi corpus and related texts (such those found in Papyrus Berolinensis 8502 and the Codex Tchacos) further confirms this conclusion. Of the 35 passages that employ the verb,²⁶ only one instance is unambiguously benign.²⁷ Of the 34 remaining passages, 29 are unambiguously sardonic; four of the five that could be considered ambiguous occur in *Ap. John*.²⁸ In other words, setting aside the passages from the *Apocryphon*, in the Nag Hammadi texts Ⲫⲱⲃⲉ is used nearly always (29 out of 31 instances) in an unmistakably mocking, derisive sense.

The second issue is syntactical. The intransitive use of Ⲫⲱⲃⲉ has a more ambiguous meaning than that of the transitive. I suspect that the translation of Ⲫⲱⲃⲉ as “smile” (an intransitive verb) is often preferred because there is no clear direct object nor the presence of a preposition of any form.²⁹ A transitive verb, however, does not necessarily need to have an object or preposition. Bentley Layton suggests that

...transitivity or intransitivity does not just refer to the construction in which a verb happens to occur in one sentence or another; but rather, to

²⁶ NHC I: *Ap. Jas.* 3,37; NHC II: *Ap. John* 13,19; 22,12; 26,26; *Gos. Phil.* 65,15; 74,26-36; *Hyp. Arch.* 89,24; *Orig. World* 112,27; 113,13; 116,26; *Thom. Cont.* 142,22; 143,24. NHC III: *Ap. John* 29,4; *Soph. Jes. Chr.* 92,1. NHC V: 2 *Apoc. James* 60,20-22. NHC VI: *Acts Pet.* 12 *Apos.* 3,31; *Thund.* 15,12; *Disc.* 8-9 58,32; *Asclepius* 65,33; 72,32-33. NHC VII: *Apoc. Pet.* 81-83; *Treat. Seth* 53, 32-33; 54,3; 54,13; 56,6-19; 60,13-14; 62,27-64; 63,4-31; 64,17-65,1. NHC XI: *Val. Exp.* 34,22-38. BG: *Act Pet.* 129,8-9; 132,5-7. Codex Tchacos: *Gos. Jud.* 34,2-10; 36,23-37; 55,12-20. For a helpful discussion of the use of Ⲫⲱⲃⲉ in Gnostic sources, see Ernesto Bermejo Rubio, “La imagen de la risa en los textos Gnósticos y sus modelos Bíblicos,” *Estudios Bíblicos* 65 (2007): 177-202.

²⁷ *Disc* 8-9 58,32-59,1 reads, “And I rejoice, my father, because I see you smiling. And the universe rejoices.” (trans. Brashler et al., *NHL*).

²⁸ NHC II: *Ap. John* 13,19; 22,12; 26,26; NHC III: *Ap. John* 29,4. The fifth ambiguous usage is also in NHC III, *Soph. Jes. Chr.* 92,1. If my interpretation is correct, the passages from *Ap. John* should be understood as derisive. The only text that perhaps does not fit is II 26,26 and pars., where the savior does not appear to be directly correcting anyone.

²⁹ This is the definition of Thomas Lambdin, *Introduction to Sahidic Coptic* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), 67-68. Crum, in the introduction to his lexicon (p. vii) uses a similar categorical scheme but nonetheless questions whether the transitive/intransitive distinction is valid in Coptic.

the verb's *potential* compatibility with the direct object construction—its *ability* to take a direct object—as a permanent feature of its lexical character. In other words, transitivity is here defined as the essential property of a lexical subclass of verbs, not an incidental feature of usage in one particular sentence or another.³⁰

In this definition, ⲙⲟⲩⲉ may be understood as transitive simply by its ability to have an object. Moreover, one can adduce many instances where a verb lacks an explicit direct object yet is clearly functioning in a transitive sense.³¹ Likewise, in the passages under discussion in *Ap. John*, one can fairly easily infer the object of the savior's laughter—Moses and those who think he is trustworthy.³²

The final consideration for this question of benevolent smiling is contextual. Stephen Halliwell provides categories that give further insight into the cultural function of laughter. He identifies two types of laughter in classical Greece—playful and consequential.³³ Playful laughter involves “lightness of tone; autonomous enjoyment; psychological relaxation; and a shared acceptance of the self-sufficient presuppositions or conventions of such laughter by all who participate in it.”³⁴ Consequential laughter, however, has a purpose other than pleasure for pleasure's sake. Halliwell lists the

³⁰ Bentley Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2004), 128 (italics original).

³¹ For a helpful discussion and several examples, see Layton, *Coptic Grammar*, §169.

³² The verb ⲙⲟⲩⲉ occurs in just four scenes, two of which are explicit corrections of Moses' account: NHC II 13,19/BG 45,7 (on Sophia's moving to and fro) and NHC III 29,4 (on the true nature of Adam's trance). The third instance of ⲙⲟⲩⲉ (NHC II 22,12/BG 58,4/NHC III 28,19) does not refer to Moses by name but does refute his account of the role of the serpent in the temptation of Adam. The only instance of ⲙⲟⲩⲉ wherein Moses is not mentioned and the biblical text is not quoted occurs in NHC II 26,25-26/BG 68,3/NHC III 34,21. In short, three of the four scenes where the savior laughs involve a direct refutation of Moses or his text.

³³ Halliwell, “Uses of Laughter,” 283.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

following purposes of consequential laughter: “Causing embarrassment or shame, signaling hostility, damaging a reputation, contributing to the defeat of an opponent, and delivering public chastisement.”³⁵ In the context of the *Apocryphon*, where laughter is associated with corrections of Moses’ account, the laughter, if understood consequentially, may function to further damage Moses’ reputation.³⁶ That the savior’s laughter could be playful or benign seems less likely simply because there is no context here other than that of ridicule.³⁷

The savior’s laughter should also be interpreted in the context of divine revelation. Gods and heavenly revealers laugh and play.³⁸ To laugh in the context of a

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997), 69-77, agrees that the laughter in *Ap. John* is “consequential” and derisive. She argues that the purpose of the laughter in Gnostic sources is aimed primarily at reform.

³⁷ Ibid., 290. Halliwell suggests that appropriate contexts would include, e.g., the symposium, the *kōmos*, or the civic festival.

³⁸ Karl Heinrich Rengstorff (“γελᾶω, καταγελᾶω, γέλως,” *TDNT* I:660) identifies laughter as a basic characteristic of the gods, so much so that laughter is “inseparable from theophany.” This sentiment is echoed by Norbert Brox, *Der Hirt des Hermas* (Kommentar zu den Apostolischen Vätern; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 143; and Carolyn Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas (Hermeneia)* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 76. See also Gilhus, *Laughing Gods*; Halliwell, *op. cit.*; Jean Rudhardt, “Rires et Sourires Divins: Essai sur la Sensibilité Religieuse des Grecs et des Premiers Chrétiens,” *RTP* 124 (1992): 389-405.

On laughing gods, see, e.g., Homer, *Il.* 1.595-600, 15.101, 21.389; Hesiod, *Theog.* 40; Theocritus, *Id.* 7.19-20, 42, 128 (on the identification of the smiling goatherd in this poem as a god, see Georg Luck, “Zur Deutung von Theocrits Thalysien,” *MH* 23 [1966]: 186-89, esp. 188); *Korē Kosmou* 23.10 (noted above, with a curious parallel in Dieterich, *Abraxas*, 182ff., cited in Walter Scott, *Hermetica* [London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968], III: 501); Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 7.15.72; Plutarch, *Aemilius Paulus* 25.1-2; Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, 1.4. It is worth noting that God laughs only four times in the Hebrew Bible (Ps 2:4, 37:13, 59:8, and Prov 1:26 [Wisdom]), texts which later caused the Rabbis considerable consternation (Rengstorff, “γελᾶω,” 661).

In addition to the aforementioned *Jos. Asen.* 16.7 and *Hermas, Vis.* 3.8.2, the laughing/smiling revealer is a common topos in the Nag Hammadi literature as well as in other heterodox texts. See, e.g., *Soph. Jes. Chr.* NHC III 92,1/BG 79,14 (noted above); *Act Pet.* BG 129,9-19. On the laughter of Christ, see also Antonio Orbe, *Cristología gnóstica* (Biblioteca de autores cristianos; Madrid: Editorial Católica, 1976), 2:229-37 and Guy Stroumsa, “Christ’s Laughter: Docetic Origins Reconsidered,” *J ECS* 12 (2004): 267-88.

revelation thus reinforces the speaker's heavenly origin. The laughter serves to remind the reader/hearer of the authority of the revealer.³⁹ The laughter does not have to be mordant in these instances, but it does carry more force than a blithe smile.

In sum, the laughter of the savior in *Ap. John* carries considerable rhetorical force. The lexical domain (especially in the Nag Hammadi documents), the syntax, and the context of the word $\kappa\omega\sigma\epsilon$ all suggest an assertion of the savior's authority in relation to Moses, and perhaps even a complete mockery of the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

Not as Moses Said... but Just as Moses Said

That the authors of *Ap. John* provide alternative interpretations of the scriptures is by now self-evident. Their reworking of scripture, at times tweaking its narrative to serve their own purposes, is clear even without the explicit rejection of Moses' version of events. As is clear from the previous discussions of the formal citations and the savior's laughter, the corrections of Moses are probably not best understood as benign but rather quite caustic. The assault on Moses in some ways appears to be thoroughgoing. In light of this fact, several features of the corrections are curious. First, the points of greatest disagreement are not found where the savior explicitly refutes Moses.⁴⁰ In fact, in some instances of the corrections, it is unclear whether any disagreement exists at all. This is particularly the case in the clarification of the nature of Adam's sleep (NHC II 22,21-29 and pars.), in the discussion of the rib (NHC II 22,29-23,4 and pars.), and in the assertion

³⁹ Tardieu, *Écrits*, 404, writes, "Le sourire annonce une déclaration solennelle, il est signe de l'inhabitation de l'Esprit dans le locuteur... [L]e sourire est la preuve de la distance qui sépare l'apparence (question posée, souffrance physique) à la réalité (parole de révélation, origine céleste)." Orbe, *Cristología*, 2:231, argues similarly.

⁴⁰ E.g., depicting the Creator God, the one God of the Jews and early Catholics, as a malevolent "abortion" (BG 46,10) appears much more disputatious than refuting the precise nature of Adam's sleep.

that Noah was not alone (NHC II 29,8-10). Second, and perhaps related, the versions do not always agree on how Moses erred. In other words, when reading the four versions side by side, although one is assured that Moses is wrong, the true account remains murky. This feature is especially evident in the discussion of the rib. Third, the authors use already existing interpretive traditions that are shared by their Jewish and early catholic counterparts, including the scriptures themselves, to demonstrate Moses' error. This has two implications: (a) again, aside from the explicit mention of Moses' error, the new Gnostic interpretation may not be a correction at all and (b) the texts corrected were already recognized as problematic.⁴¹ These three features betray a close relationship to both the biblical text and contemporary, early catholic interpretations, a relationship that is in tension with the strong rhetoric of correction.

Lack of Substantial Disagreement

In spite of a patent disregard for Moses in the direction citations, the alternative interpretation offered by the savior is often closely aligned with the literal reading of the biblical text. Although the rhetoric suggests that Moses is quite wrong, the "true" meaning is actually quite close to the literal sense of the text. Two examples of this are the trance described in Gen 2:17 and refuted in the *Apocryphon* (NHC II 22,21-29 and pars.) and the number of people saved by the flood. As will be seen, in the case of the former, Adam's trance as described in the biblical text can be naturally interpreted through a Gnostic lens without challenging Moses' authority and, in the case of the latter, the disagreement is simply manufactured.

⁴¹ The idea of scriptural chestnuts is explored in chapter two, pp. 51-59 above.

Adam's trance: sleep need not be interpreted literally

Following Genesis, the *Apocryphon's* account of the creation of the woman begins with the creator God bringing a trance over Adam. The aim, however, is not to create a partner for Adam, but to steal back the power that Barbelo's five lights tricked him into breathing into Adam (NHC II 19,15-33 and pars.). The text reads as follows:

“And (the Chief Ruler) wanted to bring out the power which he himself had given him. And he brought a ‘trance’ over Adam.” And I said to the savior, “What is the ‘trance’?” And he said, “It is not as Moses wrote and you heard. For he said in his first book, ‘He put him to sleep,’ but (it was) in his perception. For indeed he said through the prophet, ‘I will make their hearts heavy, that they may not pay attention and may not see.’” (II 22,18-28)

At first glance it appears that the authors do have a legitimate objection to Moses' account. Although Moses depicts Adam slipping into a literal sleep,⁴² the authors of the *Apocryphon* understand Adam's sleep in a non-literal way. The trance, they contend, was actually placed on Adam's perception. But is their version of events really at odds with Moses' account?

It is especially curious that Moses would be wrong when he says that the Chief Ruler cast a trance on Adam and made him sleep. We have already seen how the story as narrated in Genesis is in many ways problematic.⁴³ The general disparagement of sleep described earlier is heightened in many Christian sources.⁴⁴ Several texts portray sleep

⁴² To underscore Moses' improper, literal understanding, the translator of NHC II 22,24 uses the unambiguous $\Delta\chi\tau\omicron\ \bar{\mu}\omicron\tau\omicron$ (he laid him down [to sleep]) instead of the more ambiguous $\Delta\chi\tau\epsilon\tau\bar{\eta}\kappa\omicron\tau\kappa$ (he put him to sleep) of BG and NHC III. See Crum, s.vv. $\chi\tau\omicron$ and $\bar{\eta}\kappa\omicron\tau\kappa$.

⁴³ See chapter two, pp. 54-55 above.

⁴⁴ Beginning in the New Testament itself. Reflecting its milieu, the New Testament often offers a rather disparaging view of sleep. The danger of sleep is often described in relation to Christ's imminent return and/or as an exhortation to godliness. See, e.g., Matt 24:36-44 (exhortation to watchfulness), 25:1-

as one of the key hindrances to spiritual enlightenment, an apt description of the fallen condition of humanity.⁴⁵ For example, Clement of Alexandria asserts, “The one who has been illuminated is therefore awake towards God; and such an one lives.”⁴⁶ The author of the *Hymn of the Pearl* narrates the perfidy of the Egyptians as they trap the protagonist in ignorance:

They gave me a mixture of cunning and treachery, and I tasted their food. I did not any longer recognize that I was a child of the (Great) King, but rather acted as a servant to their king. And I even came to the pearl for which my parents had sent me on the mission but sank into deep sleep under the heaviness of their food.⁴⁷

Later, when the Prince receives a letter from his homeland and remembers his mission, a female being (perhaps the letter personified)⁴⁸ wakes him up from his sleep and helps

13 (the parable of the ten virgins); Mark 13:32-37 and pars. (the parable of the man on a journey); Rom 13:11 (ethical exhortation in light of the dawn of salvation); 1 Thess 5:1-11 (the day of the Lord like a thief in the night, live as one belonging to the day).

It should be noted that not all references to sleep in the NT are negative—dreams and visions have a positive function in several NT texts. In the early chapters of Matthew, Joseph is given divine directions five times “in a dream (κατ’ ὄναρ)” (see Matt 1:20-15; 2:12; 2:13; 2:19; 2:22). Later, at the end of the Gospel, Pilate’s wife sends word to him to be cautious in his judgment, for she had suffered “a great deal because of a dream about him” (Matt 27:19). In Acts, revelatory visions play a large role in moving the narrative forward (note, however, Acts never uses the word “dream [ὄναρ]”). See, e.g., Acts 9:1-16, 22:6-16, and 26:12-18 (Saul/Paul’s call); 10:1-11:18 (Cornelius and Peter); and 16:6-10 (Paul’s call to Macedonia). The vision in the last text transpires “during the night (διὰ τῆς νυκτός),” thus perhaps implying that it was a dream. For more on the ambivalence of the New Testament towards sleep/visions, see François Bovon, “Those Christians Who Dream: The Authority of Dreams in the First Centuries of Christianity,” in *Studies in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 144-62, esp. 153-54.

For two helpful discussions of sleep in Gnostic sources, see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 2001), 68-73 and George MacRae, “Sleep and Awakening in Gnostic Texts,” in *Le origini dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina 13-18 Aprile 1966*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 496-507.

⁴⁵ MacRae, “Sleep,” 503f. offers many helpful references.

⁴⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.9. The Greek text reads: ἐγρήγορεν ἄρα πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὁ πεφωτισμένος ὁ δὲ τοιοῦτος ζῇ.

⁴⁷ *The Hymn of the Pearl* 109.32-35 (trans. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*).

⁴⁸ So Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 374.

him return home.⁴⁹ *The Gospel of Truth* likewise describes salvation as awakening from sleep. It reads,

Such is the way of those who have cast ignorance aside from them like sleep, not esteeming it as anything, nor do they esteem its works as solid things either, but they leave them behind like a dream in the night. The knowledge of the Father they value as the dawn. This is the way each one has acted, as though asleep at the time when he was ignorant. And this is the way he has <come to knowledge>, as if he had awakened. {and} Good for the man who will return and awaken.⁵⁰

The *Apocryphon* itself conceives of the human condition in this way. Epinoia is sent to awaken (ΤΟΥΝΟC) Adam and his seed repeatedly.⁵¹ The Pronoia hymn that concludes the longer version twice refers to the awakening of souls who are trapped in a deep sleep.⁵² With categories such as these floating around and in fact employed in the *Apocryphon*, it is not too much of a stretch to see the activity of God in Gen 2:21 as suspect.⁵³ Thus, as discussed earlier, George MacRae can reasonably assert that it was actually through exegesis of Genesis that sleep was

⁴⁹ *The Hymn of the Pearl* 111.65.

⁵⁰ *Gos. Truth* 29,32-30,14 (trans. Attridge, *NHL*).

⁵¹ See, e.g., BG 55,15-18//II 21,15-16; II 23,30-31, 34; BG 63,18-64,1.

⁵² NHC II 31,6; 31,20. MacRae, “Sleep,” 505f., suggests that there may be a relationship between the Pronoia Hymn and Eph 5:14, possibly another baptismal hymn.

⁵³ Josephus, *Ant.* 1.35-36, perhaps reveals some discomfort with this passage in his paraphrase of the events. He writes, “[God, seeing Adam without a partner,] extracted one of his ribs while he slept (κοιμωμένου) and from it formed woman...” (trans. Thackeray, LCL). Two changes are worth noting: 1) God does not put Adam to sleep, rather, Josephus implies that Adam fell asleep on his own and 2) Josephus departs from the language of the LXX, changing ὑπνωσεν to κοιμωμένου, the latter being a word with decidedly less baggage than the former.

introduced as an integral part of this myth.⁵⁴ Why then do the authors of *Ap. John* find it necessary to correct Moses on this point?⁵⁵

Here the Nag Hammadi document *The Hypostasis of the Archons* provides a useful comparison to *Ap. John*. The parallel passage (*Hyp. Arch.* 89,3-7) reads, “The rulers took counsel with one another and said, ‘Come, let us bring a sleep (ΟΥΒΩΕ) upon Adam.’ And he slept (ΔΥΣΟΡΠ). Now the sleep (ΤΒΩΕ) that they brought on him is ignorance (ΜΝΤΑΤΤΟΟΥΝ).”⁵⁶ Here we see the author of *Hyp. Arch.* dealing with scriptural text in the precise manner that I argue that the authors of the *Apocryphon* could have worked with it. The author finds no need to change the text of Genesis, maintaining even the originally intransitive sense of ὑπνώσεν, “and he slept.” Nor does the author feel compelled to correct Moses, he simply offers the Gnostic interpretation—the sleep is ignorance. The result is that Moses’ account survives unscathed, its status perhaps even enhanced as a vehicle of true revelation.

Noah’s companions (NHC II 29,8-10 and pars.)⁵⁷

In the final correction of Moses, there are actually two points of contention: that Noah hid in an ark and that he was alone. Presently, attention will be directed to the second issue. BG 73,4-9 reads, “It is not as Moses said, ‘He hid himself in an ark

⁵⁴ MacRae, “Sleep,” 498.

⁵⁵ The Coptic word itself (ΟΒΩ) has a dual meaning—“to sleep” or “to forget” (see Crum, s.v.).

⁵⁶ The Coptic text and translation (with modifications) is from Bentley Layton, “The Hypostasis of the Archons,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7* (NHS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 234-259, here 240-41.

⁵⁷ On the minor critique of Moses’ account of the creation of the woman, see below, “Disagreement on the Disagreement.”

(κιβωτός),’ but (ἄλλά) she [Epinoia at the instigation of Pronoia]⁵⁸ sheltered him in a place, not Noah alone, but (ἄλλά) people [ἄνθρωποι] from the immovable race [ἡ ἀκίνητος ἡγεμονία].”⁵⁹ As with the reinterpretation of the sleep, at this point it is as if the authors of the *Apocryphon* are creating points of disagreement rather than actually finding them in the biblical text. In this instance, the LXX is clear that Noah is *not* alone.⁶⁰ Although Noah alone is said to have found favor with God in Gen 6:8 and he alone is mentioned in Gen 8:1,⁶¹ at several points in the narrative, particularly with reference to the ark, both Noah and his entire family are mentioned. In Genesis 6:18, when God first warns Noah of the flood, he tells Noah to enter the ark along with his wife and his sons and his sons’ wives. Genesis 7:7 narrates how Noah and his wife and his sons and his sons’ wives went into the ark with him and survived the flood. Likewise, in Gen 7:23, the text describes how all humans and all creatures were destroyed by the flood, except for Noah alone (μόνος) and those who were with him in the ark (καὶ οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ κιβωτῷ).⁶²

⁵⁸ Somewhat surprisingly, Pronoia acts without the aid of Epinoia in NHC II.

⁵⁹ Trans. Waldstein and Wisse with modifications.

⁶⁰ In NHC II and III, the “citation” of Moses in the text of the *Apocryphon* itself speaks of multiple persons, “They hid themselves in an ark.” On this, see Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 270 and 292 n. 93.

⁶¹ Philo, *QG* 2.26, speaking to Gen 8:1, explains why God remembers Noah and the beasts and the cattle but not Noah’s wife and children, demonstrating how one verse could be misconstrued such that Philo felt an explanation was necessary. Perhaps the idea that Noah was alone gained currency in some circles of Judaism (influenced by or reflected in, e.g., *1 En.* 10:1-3; 67:1-3; 106) and Philo actually has some of these groups in mind. Some time later, Encratite Christians would find inspiration for abstinence in Noah’s solitude.

⁶² For more biblical references to Noah and his family, see also Gen 7:1, 13, 8:16, 18. Noah’s family is likewise mentioned in many retellings of the story. See, e.g., *Jub.* 6:2, 10:3 (but see 5:20-23); *Sib. Or.* 1.210, 265-79; Ps. Philo 3:4-8; *4 Ezra* 3:11; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.78; 1 Pet 3:20-21; 2 Pet 3:5. The prophet Ezekiel implicitly assumes that Noah’s family was saved when he argues that in light of the wickedness of the land, were Noah (or Job or Daniel) alive in his day, Noah would only be able to save himself (see Ezek 14:12-23).

Given that those who are with Noah in the ark are literally his kinspeople (γενεά), is there really any disagreement? At the very least, it does not require too much interpretive ingenuity to read Moses' account in line with the *Apocryphon*.⁶³ The point, however, is to disagree.

Disagreement on the Disagreement

The disagreements with Moses are so minor that the authors of the variant versions do not always agree with each other on where the Genesis account is wrong. Zlatko Pleše provides a helpful discussion of the significance of variations such as these.⁶⁴ As a brief glance into the apparatus of the NA²⁷ reveals, ancient copyists had the authority to make minor modifications to the texts that they copied, a perfectly acceptable practice called διασκευή. Pleše defines διασκευή as “the editorial labor in which the author, his pupil, or some later redactor introduce minor changes into a text while keeping intact its ὑπόθεσις (‘subject’, ‘theme’, ‘content’) and ‘most of its wording.’”⁶⁵ In the corrections of Moses in the *Apocryphon*, the subject, theme, or content that cannot be altered is the fact of Moses' error. The actual content of the error is to a certain degree irrelevant. Put simply, the disagreement between the variant versions suggests that the authors were not so much concerned with getting the facts straight as with pointing out

⁶³ In fact, it is grammatically possible that the disagreement is quite minor. The correction could be understood to be with reference to the place of the hiding, after which the author offered an interpretation of whom was hidden, relying on the biblical tradition that Noah and others were saved from the flood.

⁶⁴ Pleše, *Poetics*, 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., citing Galen, *In Hipp. De victu acutorum* (CMG V 9.1, p. 120.5-14).

Moses' error. As the following discussion illustrates, the way in which the versions vary shows just how inconsequential their disagreement really is.

Ialdabaoth creates the woman (NHC II 22,29-23,24 and pars.)

Gerard Luttikhuisen points out that the creation of the woman in *Ap. John* is one of the more confusing sections of the entire work.⁶⁶ The confusion arises out of three points. First, the female helping principle (βοηθός; see Gen 2:18 LXX) has already been introduced as Epinoia and she has already been given the name Zoe (II 20,14-19 and pars.). Although Zoe/Epinoia appears in this scene, the woman who is created is also given the name Zoe, the “mother of the living.”⁶⁷ It does not help that Barbelo is also called Zoe (BG 38,12).⁶⁸ Second, the story of the creation of the woman is introduced following the biblical account: Ialdabaoth is constructing the woman from the rib, the very point that is refuted (at least partially) in the dispute with Moses. In other words, although Moses is said to be wrong about the rib (at least in NHC II), the rib is still key to the *Apocryphon*'s interpretation and reference to the rib reappears in Adam's

⁶⁶ Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions*, 67.

⁶⁷ NHC II 23,23-24 and pars.

⁶⁸ Or simply “the mother of (all) the living” in NHC II and III, the gloss provided by Gen 3:20 LXX. Sergio La Porta (“Sophia Mētēr: Reconstructing a Gnostic Myth,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years*, 188-207) attempts to identify Sophia as Zoe but fails to convince. In the end the idea does not help clarify the ambiguity anyway. See Williams, “Response,” 217-220.

The *Gospel of Philip* 59,6-11 provides a curious parallel that may shed some light on the use of Zoe in the *Apocryphon*. The text speaks of three Marys who accompanied Jesus: his mother, her sister, and his companion. In the *Apocryphon* Zoe is described as the mother (Barbelo), the sister (Epinoia/Sophia—note too that in the *Apocryphon*, BG 36,16 and NHC III 14,9-10, Sophia is identified as “our sister [ΤΕΝΩΒΡΩΝΕ]”), and the companion (Eve). Though she is not identified as our sister in NHC II at this point of the narrative, in 23,20-23, she is given the epithet.

exclamation.⁶⁹ Third, and finally, the versions themselves disagree with each other on the events; thus, a reading across the page of the synopsis does not help clarify the confusion.

What is clear, however, is that the versions do not agree on how Moses is wrong.

A comparison of the texts side by side is helpful at this point.

NHC III/BG:

[And] he (Ialdabaoth) wanted (ΔΥΟΥΕΩ) to bring the power (δύναμις/δωμ) out of him
And he made a new form (ἀνάπλασις) in the shape of a woman.

And he raised her up before him (ΔΥΤΟΥΝΟΩC ΜΠΕΦΜΤΟ ΕΒΟΛ),

not as Moses said,
“He took a rib and created a woman
and placed her beside him (ΔΥΚΩ ΜΜΟC ΔΑΤΗΥ).”

NHC II/IV:

And he (Ialdabaoth) brought (ΔΥΕΙΝΕ) a part (μέρος) of the power (δωμ) out of him.
And he made another form (πλάσις) in the shape of a woman

according to the likeness of Epinoia which had appeared to him.

And he brought the part which he had taken (ΔΥΕΙΝΕ ΜΠΜΕΡΟC ΕΝΤΑΥΧΙ ΤΥ) from the power of the man (ΕΒΟΛ ΔΝ ΤΔΩΜ ΜΠΡΩΜΕ) into the female form

and not as Moses said,
“his rib.”

According to the short version, represented here by NHC III,⁷⁰ Moses’ primary error relates to the *place* of the woman’s creation. Whereas Moses narrates the creation of a woman away from man (thus she is subsequently brought to him—ΔΥΚΩ ΜΜΟC ΔΑΤΗΥ),⁷¹ in actuality (according to the savior in the shorter version), the woman was raised up in the presence of the man (ΔΥΤΟΥΝΟΩC ΜΠΕΦΜΤΟ ΕΒΟΛ). The rib is not presented as a problem, *per se*. In fact, in the immediate context, two features of the narrative make it

⁶⁹ Confusion about the rib is inevitable in NHC II when after denying that Eve was created from Adam’s rib, the authors quote nearly verbatim Adam’s exclamation found in Genesis, “This is indeed bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” thus implying that the woman came from Adam’s bones, i.e., his rib.

⁷⁰ BG here occupies a middle reading between NHC III and NHC II/IV, as it reads, “He took a rib and created woman beside him.” On the relationship between the three, see below in the diachronic analysis.

⁷¹ Following Gen 2:22 (LXX): καὶ ᾠκοδόμησεν κύριος ὁ θεὸς τὴν πλευράν ἣν ἔλαβεν ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἀδάμ εἰς γυναῖκα καὶ ἤγαγεν αὐτὴν πρὸς τὸν Ἀδάμ.

appear that Ialdabaoth is working with the rib: (a) just before creating the woman, in his desire (ΠΕΦΟΥΩΩ) for the spiritual power Ialdabaoth wanted (ΑΦ ΖΝΑΦ) to bring Epinoia out of the man's rib (NHC III 29,13-15//BG 59,7-9) and (b) immediately following the creation of woman, Adam exclaims (following Gen 2:23-24), "Indeed you are bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (NHC III 30,5-6//BG 60,5-7),⁷² thus suggesting that the rib really is not a problem.⁷³

Philo interprets the biblical passage in a similar manner in the second book of his *Legum Allegoriae*.⁷⁴ After describing God's using Adam's "side (πλευρά, following the LXX)" to create Eve and reminding the reader that "sides" is an everyday term for power/strength (δύναμις),⁷⁵ he interprets Adam's exclamation using his usual allegory of the soul. He writes,

⁷² Philo of Alexandria (*QG* 1.28) allows for a negative interpretation of this phrase when he writes, "[Adam] might have said deprecatingly, being dumbfounded at this apparition, 'Is it really possible that this wonderful and lovely vision came from bones and formless flesh and things without quality...'" (trans. Marcus, LCL). Such an interpretation is unlikely in the *Apocryphon* as the narrator tells us immediately preceding Adam's statement that he "became sober from the drunkenness of death" and Epinoia "lifted the veil on his mind."

⁷³ This interpretation of the bones as somehow spiritually endowed is enhanced by the fact that in the creation of Adam's psychic body (NHC II 15,14-15), the power Divinity (BG//NHC III)/Goodness (NHC II) first creates a "bone soul" (ΝΟΥΨΥΧΗ ΝΚΛΑ), as if the bone is foundational to everything else. This may be related to the ancient idea of the marrow as "a principle and mark of life" (Lupieri, *The Mandaean*, 189 n.12). See Roelof van den Broek, "The Creation of Adam's Psychic Body in the Apocryphon of John," in *Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity*, ed. *idem* (NHMS 39; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 75. He cites Plato's *Timaeus*, 73B and 73D, wherein Plato identifies marrow as that around which "the whole body was constructed." This idea is echoed in BG (the text that appears to be less concerned with the bone and more concerned with the location of the creation of the woman) 49,16-18: the fourth power (Providence/Lordship) creates a marrow soul (ΝΟΥΨΥΧΗ ΝΚΝΟΦ) that is "the entire foundation of the body" (ΜΝ ΠΚΩ ΕΖΡΑΙ ΤΗΡΦ ΜΠCΩΜΑ, following van den Broek, the ΜΝ here is understood epexegetically).

⁷⁴ Philo, *Leg.* 2.19-21, 40-41.

⁷⁵ *Leg.* 2.21, "πλευρὰς ὁ βίος ὀνομάζει τὰς δυνάμεις."

God leads active perception to the mind, knowing that its movement and apprehensive power must revert to the mind as their starting point. The mind, on beholding that, which it had before as a potentiality and as a dormant state, now become a finished product, an activity, and in motion, marvels at it, and cries out aloud declaring that it is not foreign to it but in the fullest sense its own, for it says, “This is bone out of my bones,” that is, power out of my powers, for “bone” is used here as power and strength...⁷⁶

The shorter version of the *Apocryphon* reads similar to Philo. It allows for the possibility that the woman was created from the power that was hidden in the man and resided in the rib.⁷⁷

The long version, on the contrary, finds fault with Moses for depicting the creation of the woman from the rib of the man. The location is not even mentioned. Rather than simply “wanting” (Ἰ 2ΝΔ9/ΟΥΕΩ) to bring the power out of the man as in the short version, Ialdabaoth actually “brought out a part of [Adam’s] power out of him.” Ialdabaoth then forms the woman and puts that stolen piece of power into the female form. Moses is wrong to suggest that the woman is linked to the man through the rib; she shares only a piece of his divine power.⁷⁸

In sum, the versions disagree about the substance of Moses’ error: according to NHC III and BG, it appears that the location of the woman’s creation is the problem;

⁷⁶ *Leg.* 2.40-41 (trans. Colson and Whitaker, LCL).

⁷⁷ Recall BG 59,12-15: “He wanted to bring the power out of him in order to make a form once again in the shape of a woman.” *L.A.E.* 41-42 may provide an interesting parallel here. Just after God promises Adam that he will raise him on the last day in the resurrection, we are told that “After these words God made a triangular seal and sealed the tomb in order that no one might do anything to him for six days, when his rib would return to him.” The most obvious connection is to the death of Eve and her burial beside him, though the language of the resurrection and God’s sealing of the tomb are suggestive.

⁷⁸ The long version suffers from some inconsistencies as a result of this shift. The quote from Adam “bone of my bones...” remains in the narrative, but as a non sequitur. Likewise, the attempt to seize Epinoia through the rib remains, though it is now more clearly understood to be a separate event from the creation of the woman.

NHC II and IV take issue with the material used in her creation. The element that is constant is that Moses was wrong. Understood in terms of the ancient practice of διασκευή, the content or theme (ὑπόθεσις) of this pericope is the fallibility of Moses.

Use of Existing Interpretations/Scripture Interpreting Scripture

The literature on this topic is extensive.⁷⁹ At present I wish only to show that the passages that criticize Moses' account both rely on the very scriptures that appear to be criticized and depend upon other Jewish and early catholic interpretations. As already discussed at length in chapter two, the passages in the *Apocryphon* in which Moses is refuted interpret biblical texts that had already for some time troubled ancient exegetes. As such, many different solutions cropped up, some of which find their way into the texts in question.

Isaiah's proof of the nature of Adam's trance (NHC II 22,25-29 and pars.)

As established above, the point of dispute as regards Adam's trance is relatively minor, demonstrating to a certain extent the *Apocryphon's* ultimate dependence on Moses' account. Moreover, as we saw earlier, not only is the disagreement minor, the legitimacy of the correction is established by means of a proof text from Isaiah, "For indeed (καὶ γάρ) he [Ialdabaoth] said through the prophet (προφήτης), 'I will make their [humanity's] hearts heavy that they may not pay attention and may not (οὔτε) see.'"⁸⁰ The prophet, therefore, is a reliable witness to the fiendish intentions of

⁷⁹ See above, chapter one.

⁸⁰ NHC II 22,25-28, citing Isaiah 6:10. As discussed above in chapter two, the use of Isaiah is not, as Luttikhuisen (*Gnostic Revisions*, 20) has proposed, simply for the sake of argument.

Yaldabaoth, who is indicted by his very own words.⁸¹ The favorable use of Isaiah demonstrates that the *Apocryphon* is not blindly critical of the whole of scripture. Rather, the main target is Moses, whose error is proved by means of scripture interpreting scripture.⁸²

Noah in the cloud (NHC II 29,6-12 and pars.)

We have already seen above that the final explicit dispute with Moses actually involves two corrections, the second of which is not really a correction at all. It could be argued that the first (“They hid themselves in an ark [κιβωτός]”), likewise, is not a correction of Moses. Nowhere in the LXX do we find Noah “hiding” himself in the ark.⁸³ Since several extra-biblical (Enochic?) traditions are present in this section of *Ap. John*,⁸⁴ the possibility must be allowed that the authors of the *Apocryphon* may be working with traditional material in this section rather than with the text of Moses as found in the LXX.⁸⁵ If this is the case, the rejection of Moses is (yet again) largely rhetorical.

⁸¹ Recall that the prophet (and Moses!) is also a reliable witness to Yaldabaoth’s folly. The arrogant claim, “I am a jealous God; there is none beside me” (BG 44,14-15//NHC II 13,8-9) is a conflation of Exodus 20:5 and Isaiah 45:5.

⁸² As will be discussed below in chapter four, this may help to identify against whom the authors of *Ap. John* are writing. Moses is assaulted using a very Christian interpretation of Isaiah (see, e.g., Mark 4:10-12). See Craig Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6:9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (JSOTS 64; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

⁸³ Cf. Gen 7:7 wherein Noah and his family are said to have *entered* (εἰσῆλθεν) the ark. In *1 En.* 10:2, however, God sends his angel to Noah with the instructions, “Say to him in my name, Hide yourself, for the whole earth will be destroyed...” (trans. Knibb, *Apocryphal Old Testament*). Another Gnostic text, *Hyp. Arch.* 92,11, also uses this language of hiding.

⁸⁴ See above, chapter two, n. 82.

⁸⁵ See Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions*, 97 n.3.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that as with the previous corrections, certain biblical elements are maintained, even those that can be thought of as key contours. The account begins with Yaldabaoth repenting (Δ⁹ῤ²ΗΤ⁹; an activity that otherwise makes no sense in the narrative),⁸⁶ Noah still occupies a positive role in the story;⁸⁷ and the reality of the flood is affirmed (though it is interpreted in a thoroughly allegorical manner as a flood of darkness).⁸⁸ The only point of true dispute is the “hiding place” of Moses and the people of his γενεά.

Whereas Moses narrates the use of an ark (κιβωτός) to protect Noah and his family, the *Apocryphon* insists that Noah and the immovable race went into a “place (τόπος)” and hid (ΔΥΖΩΠ, NHC II; σκεπάζω, “shelter,” NHC III//BG) in a “luminous cloud (ΟΥΚΛΟΟΛΕ ΝΟΥΘΕΙΝ).”⁸⁹ It is possible, as Pleše has argued, that at this point the *Apocryphon*, despite its critique of Moses, is deeply indebted to the scriptural text.⁹⁰ The act of hiding in a cloud is explained by linking Septuagintal passages that use similar wording, in this case, the ark (κιβωτός). In the LXX, κιβωτός is used for both Noah’s boat as well as the ark of the covenant/testimony (κιβωτός τῆς διαθήκης τοῦ μαρτυρίου). In Numbers 10:33-36 (LXX), the ark of the covenant is said to lead the

⁸⁶ See NHC II 28,32-34 and pars. At this point the authors demonstrate their commitment to the text of Moses—the allusion to repentance makes sense only when read in light of Gen 6:6 LXX. See Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions*, 98-99.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Hyp. Arch.* 92,4-18.

⁸⁸ See NHC II 29,15 and pars.

⁸⁹ NHC II 29,12. The parallel passage in NHC III//BG uses the typically Bohairic synonym, ΣΗΠΕ (see Crum, s.v.). As will be discussed below in chapter four, the key shift in this passage is from an ark to a luminous cloud. Whereas the ark had come to symbolize the salvific function of the church, the luminous cloud came to occupy a similar role for Gnostics.

⁹⁰ For what follows, see Pleše, *Poetics*, 161-71.

Israelites, with a cloud covering them as they went.⁹¹ A cloud also covers the place (τόπος) where the glory of God is revealed.⁹² It is possible that the authors of the *Apocryphon* made those connections to create their corrective midrash on the Mosaic account of the flood.⁹³ If this is the case, we have an example of Moses being corrected by Moses! The likelihood of such an interpretation is greatly enhanced by the fact that the use of the cloud motif in the *Apocryphon* closely parallels that of the LXX as well as that of the NT: the cloud both hides the power of God and allows for an encounter with the numinous.⁹⁴

Sophia's movement "to and fro" (NHC II 13,13-26 and pars.)⁹⁵

This final passage to be discussed in many ways presents serious challenges to the argument of this chapter. In each of the four corrections to this point I have stressed that the disagreements are minor, and in some cases manufactured. In the case of Sophia, however, we encounter a true difference in opinion. The treatment of Sophia in *Ap. John* is quite contrary to that in Jewish and early Christian literature. Whereas Jews revered

⁹¹ Num 10:36 LXX, καὶ ἡ νεφέλη ἐγένετο σκιάζουσα ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ἡμέρας ἐν τῷ ἐξάγειν αὐτοὺς ἐκ τῆς παρεμβολῆς. See also, e.g., Exod 13:21; Num 9:15-23, where the Israelites are led ἐν στύλῳ νεφέλης.

⁹² See, e.g., Exod 24:15-18.

⁹³ *Gospel of Philip* 84,20-85,21 makes this exact move—the ark of the covenant is described as "salvation when the flood of water surges" (84,34-85,1).

⁹⁴ Pleše, *Poetics*, 161-169. Pleše refers to the "separating or privative aspect" to describe the first and "mediatory or creative aspect" to describe the second (162). See also Oepke, "νεφέλη, νέφος," in *TDNT* IV:905. Jesús Luzarraga (*Las Tradiciones de la Nube en la Biblia y en el Judaísmo Primitivo* [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1973]) offers a thorough study of the cloud motif in canonical and extra canonical sources.

⁹⁵ For an insightful treatment of this and related passages, see Antonio Orbe, "Spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas: Exegesis gnóstica de Gen. 1,2b," *Greg* 44 (1963): 691-730.

Wisdom (as evidenced in, for example, Prov 8, Sir 24, and throughout Wisdom of Solomon) and early influential strains of Christianity applied Wisdom motifs to Christ (the obvious instances are the Johannine Prologue and Col 1:15-20), *Ap. John* vilifies Sophia as the source of all the ills in the world. Indeed, this vilification is one of the distinctive marks of the *Apocryphon*'s theology.⁹⁶

In spite of this fundamental disagreement on Wisdom, in the present passage, the Jewish scriptures are still informing the presentation of Sophia. The *Apocryphon*'s explicit use of scripture to interpret scripture (as seen above in the use of Isaiah to interpret Adam's sleep) allows for the possibility that other texts have implicit references in the correction. The case of Sophia's movement is a prime candidate for one such allusion. Immediately following Yaldabaoth's boast, Sophia is said to begin "to move to and fro" (NHC II 13,14//BG 44,19-45,1). Later, in John's question, the reader learns that this single word (ἐπιφέρεισθαι in BG, ὤκει in NHC II) is an implicit reference to Gen 1:2 LXX.⁹⁷ In the same passage, Zlatko Pleše has put forth compelling evidence for an allusion to Sirach, and the implicit citation lies in the correction to Moses' account. The authors of the *Apocryphon* affirm that Sophia "moved to and fro," the dispute is over where this movement occurred. In short, it could be argued that Moses' account is affirmed inasmuch as the authors of the *Apocryphon* agree that Sophia (here equated with

⁹⁶ As noted above in chapter two, n. 58, it is true that Barbelo is a Wisdom-like figure in the *Apocryphon*. And, in this way, Wisdom motifs in *Ap. John* are somewhat ambiguous—there is both a higher and a lower Wisdom figure. It is Sophia (Wisdom!), however, who is blamed as the source of evil in the world.

⁹⁷ Giversen, "Apocryphon of John," 64-65; idem, *Apocryphon Johannis*, 232. The passage is also discussed by Louis Painchaud, "The Use of Scripture in Gnostic Literature," *JECs* 4 (1996): 129-147, here 136-38. The septuagintal text reads, "καὶ πνεῦμα θεοῦ ἐπεφέρετο ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος."

the Spirit of God⁹⁸) did in fact move back and forth (ἐπιφέρεισθαι). However, because Sophia has fallen she cannot be “over the waters” and is thus described as going about (ἐκΝΑ ἐκΝΗΥ) in the darkness of ignorance, that is, the abyss (ΠΝΟΥΝ) wherein Yaldabaoth and his minions reign.⁹⁹ This going to and fro in the abyss may be derived from Sir 24:5, in which the voice of Wisdom declares, “I alone walked about the depths of the abyss.”¹⁰⁰ If this is the case, we have further evidence that the *Apocryphon*, though explicitly critical of Moses, nonetheless finds the scriptural text trustworthy.

Conclusion

The authors of the *Apocryphon* engaged in sharply critical polemic against Moses and his books. By citing Moses only at points of error, one is given the impression that Moses is entirely unreliable. This depiction of Moses becomes the lens through which other inexplicit, though recognizable, corrections are read. The motif of the savior laughing before correcting further reinforces Moses’ errors. If the laughter is understood to be consequential or mocking, the laughter underscores the savior’s hostility towards Moses in an effort to damage his reputation. If the laughter is interpreted in light of the topos of the laughing/smiling redeemer, the savior’s authority is reiterated, again at the expense of Moses’ reliability. In either case, the laughter wields significant rhetorical force, aimed directly at Moses’ credibility.

⁹⁸ This identification is common in Jewish sources (e.g., *Jerusalem Targum* ad loc.), probably derived from creative interpretation of passages such as Prov 8:22-30 and Wis 7:21-22.

⁹⁹ See NHC II 14,26-34.

¹⁰⁰ LXX, “μόνη καὶ ἐν βάθει ἀβύσσων περιεπάτησα.” According to Crum’s index, ΝΟΥΝ and ⲱⲓⲕ are the Coptic equivalents of ἄβυσσος.

It is odd, then, that in spite of the strong rhetoric, the actual critique is fairly insignificant. In the cases of Adam's trance, Eve's creation from the rib, and Noah's hiding, one may question whether in fact any disagreement exists at all. In the case of the rib, the point of contention is so minute that the various versions disagree on precisely where Moses erred. Interpreted in light of the ancient practice of διασκευή, the point of the correction is not to narrate the correct version of events but rather to contest Moses' authority.

Although Moses' reliability and authority is questioned, the skepticism does not extend to the whole of the scriptures. Sophia's wandering may be informed by Sirach. Adam's trance is elucidated by another scriptural text, the prophet Isaiah. The place of Noah's "hiding" may have arisen out of a process similar to the rabbinic exegetical practice of *gezera shawa*. This has a significant impact on how we understand the identity of those who wrote and used the *Apocryphon of John*—despite the rhetoric, the hermeneutical strategies and resultant interpretations, particularly when Moses is explicitly corrected, betray the close relationship of the group to their Jewish and early catholic contemporaries. The reason for this tension will be explored at present in chapter four.

CHAPTER FOUR

A DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS

Introduction

The previous two chapters of this dissertation have demonstrated that there exists in the *Apocryphon of John* a tension with regards to the authority of the Bible. On the one hand, the text is clearly indebted to and reliant upon the creation narrative recounted in Genesis 1-7. This feature suggests that the authors found the biblical account somehow authoritative: the Bible to a certain degree accurately recounts the origin of the world. On the other hand, the *Apocryphon* is explicitly critical of Moses and his books. The rhetorical effect of repeatedly refuting Moses leaves the reader seriously doubting the reliability of the biblical narrative. This chapter examines the development of the text of the *Apocryphon* with an aim to explain how these two conflicting perspectives came to be present. If the *Apocryphon* implicitly ascribes authority to the Bible, why then does it take an explicitly argumentative tone?

The answer lies in the development of the text. In short, the interpretation of the Bible in the initial stages of the text of the *Apocryphon* is marked by a genuine attempt to understand and apply the biblical text, albeit in somewhat Gnosticizing terms. The key shift in the *Apocryphon*'s treatment of the Bible occurred after a dispute with early

catholic leaders, especially Irenaeus of Lyons. After his assault on “knowledge falsely so called,” the authors of the *Apocryphon* adopted an explicitly hostile position vis-à-vis the Bible generally and Moses specifically. In spite of this heightened rhetoric, however, the biblical text was still used to mine insight. In the present chapter, three key moments in the evolution of the *Apocryphon* are explored with a particular focus on the audience and the perceived authority of the scriptural text. The argument begins with a brief delimitation of the scope of the inquiry.

An Outline of the Parameters

Three Key Moments

As outlined in the literature review in chapter one, several studies have examined the development of the *Apocryphon of John*. The present analysis is not a duplication of those efforts but a synthesis of the findings with the aim of better understanding how the *Apocryphon* (and thus also those who read it and found it enlightening) engaged the Bible through time. Three moments—snapshots in time and, where relevant, space—provide a clearer picture of the complicated development of the text and its concomitant ambivalent treatment of the Bible.¹

The three points in time to be explored are (a) the second half of the second century, (b) the end of the second century into the early third century, and (c) the late

¹ The many graphs that have attempted to outline the evolution of the *Apocryphon* (see, e.g., Karen King, “Approaching the Variants of the *Apocryphon of John*,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years* [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 107-37, here 125; Alastair Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996], 50; Michel Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques: Codex de Berlin* [Sources Gnostiques et Manichéennes 1; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1984], 45) often lose heuristic value in their complexity. The development of *Ap. John* was certainly not straightforward, and any tree that attempts to do justice to the twists and turns in the text’s history will no doubt have many branches. A close outline of the branches, however, can obscure the broad trends in the text’s progress.

third into the fourth century. The first time frame is likely when the first recognizable version of the *Apocryphon* was originally written.² The reconstruction at this point is also the most tentative and relies heavily on reasonable conjecture.³ In this initial phase of composition, the *Apocryphon* is simply rewritten scripture. The late second century into the early third is the second key period of development. It is during this time, prior to the existence of the longer and shorter versions, that the *Apocryphon* adopted a more critical attitude toward the Bible, largely through the introduction of explicit criticism of Moses. As has been stated, this shift in tone was the result of conflicts with other Christians. We have the most concrete evidence for the third key period, the late third into the fourth century. At this time we find two distinct versions of the *Apocryphon* soon to be in the hands of Pachomian monks. The text, in both forms, has continued to evolve with subtle shifts suggesting continued dependence upon the biblical text.

The Text *and* Its Audience

Although the present analysis is primarily concerned with the development of the *Apocryphon*, attention will also be given to the reception of the text. The ideas in the text emerge out of and are received by people in a historical setting. Moreover, both the text

² Most specialists of the *Apocryphon* date it to the mid- to late-second century. See, e.g., King, *Secret Book*, 10; Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 149; Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques*, 38-45; 160s; Turner, "Sethian Gnosticism," 74. Waldstein and Wisse, *Synopsis*, 1, give the *Apocryphon* a much later date, assigning it to the early third century with the major redaction that led to two distinct versions later in that same century. In a 1995 paper to the Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism section of the SBL, in spite of arguing strenuously against a date prior to 200, Wisse somewhat reluctantly allows for the possibility that the *Apocryphon* was written in the middle of the second century (see Wisse, "After the Synopsis," 149).

³ Wisse, "After the Synopsis," 147, justly warns, "The earlier phases are increasingly obscure and speculating about them runs the risk of leading to misunderstanding rather than enhanced understanding of the content of the document." Similar sentiments are echoed by King, *Secret Revelation*, 20.

and the audience together create meaning.⁴ The aim of the present chapter is to describe both in a historically plausible manner. This approach raises an important methodological issue around the means by which the social history of a community can be reconstructed on the basis of literary artifacts. A second and related issue revolves around the geographical spread of ideas. Both will be discussed in turn.

Reconstructing Social Histories from Texts

The study of early Christianity is hampered by the fact that, outside of texts,⁵ there is little material evidence to aid in historical reconstruction.⁶ The texts themselves, then, become the primary evidence through which the history of a community is pieced together. The rationale behind the method is summarized succinctly by Bart Ehrman: “the social history of a community will affect the way it preserves its traditions.”⁷ The method is not without its problems, however. The first, and most obvious, difficulty is

⁴ Kevin Vanhoozer (“The Reader in New Testament Interpretation,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel Green [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995], 301-28, here 301) writes, “Reading is not merely a matter of perception but also of production; the reader does not discover so much as create meaning. At the very least, there would be no meaning at all if there were no readers reading. What is in the text is only potential for meaning. Meaning is actualized not by the author at the point of the text’s conception but by the reader at the point of the text’s reception.”

⁵ On the (correct) insistence that the physical manuscripts are important artifacts for our understanding of early Christianity see Larry Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006).

⁶ Noted well by Frederik Wisse, “Indirect Textual Evidence for the History of Early Christianity and Gnosticism,” in *For the Children, Perfect Instruction: Studies in Honor of Hans-Martin Schenke on the Occasion of the Berliner Arbeitskreis für koptisch-gnostische Schriften's Thirtieth Year*, ed. Hans-Gebhard Bethge et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 215-30, here 215. Wisse writes, “A discussion of methodology in the use of texts for historical reconstruction is particularly urgent in the case of early Christianity and Gnosticism. Since no identifiable Christian or Gnostic monuments, inscriptions, or artifacts survive from this period, texts are the only source of historical data.”

⁷ Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 168. This citation was brought to my attention by the insightful article, Pierluigi Piovanelli, “‘Sitting by the Waters of Dan’ or the ‘Tricky Business’ of Tracing the Social Profile of the Communities that Produced the Earliest Enochic Texts,” in *The Early Enoch Literature*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini and John Collins (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 257-81.

the inherent circular logic: the social situation is reconstructed based on textual clues before the text is then read and interpreted through that reconstruction. In the end, we are left with little more than “the text alone and our personal readings and hypotheses.”⁸

Second, the method presupposes a community behind the text that is accessible through the text.⁹ Even if there is a single community behind the text and intended for it (a proposition to be addressed below), the text may not give a clear picture or accurate

⁸ Piovanelli, “Sitting by the Waters,” 258. Wisse, “Indirect Textual Evidence,” 225, writes similarly, “The imprint of the circumstances of composition proves to be in most cases far too subtle, too inconsistent, and too often contrary to what one would expect, to allow inferring them from the text.”

⁹ Noted by Piovanelli, “Sitting by the Waters,” 258. The idea that there is one community behind one text has been challenged forcefully by Richard Bauckham and Frederik Wisse, to name two. Bauckham suggests that texts could have been written with universal intent (thus reflecting the interests of multiple communities). Wisse argues that all we can access through texts are the ideas of the individual authors. For further, see, e.g., Richard Bauckham, “For Whom Were the Gospels Written?” in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. *idem* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 9-48 and Frederik Wisse, “Stalking Those Elusive Sethians,” *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28-31, 1978*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 2:563-76 and *idem*, “Indirect Textual Evidence,” 225-29.

Bauckham’s argument will be addressed more fully below. At present, it should be noted that Wisse’s insistence that the documents from Nag Hammadi be read as individual compositions that reveal little about the community does not fully take into account the clues in the documents that reveal communities behind them. Two important elements that suggest community use are 1) clear ritual practices that are described and outlined (for more on this, see e.g., Alastair Logan, *The Gnostics* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006]; Birger Pearson, “Gnosticism as a Religion,” in *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt*, ed. *idem* [New York: T&T Clark International, 2004], 201-23) and 2) use of in-group language such as “race” (γένεα), “seed” (on this idea, see especially Michael Williams, *The Immovable Race* [Leiden: Brill, 1985], 186-209).

In addition to these textual arguments against solely individual use, insights from cultural anthropology about collective identity in ancient Mediterranean societies also suggest that these texts were communally oriented. As Bruce Malina (“Who Are We? Who Are They? Who Am I? Who Are You [Sing.]? Explaining Identity, Social and Individual,” *ASE* 24 [2007]: 103-09, here 105-06) explains, “Individual identity... runs along a range from individualistic to collectivistic.” While people in the modern West typically understand their “self” as autonomous and individual, “...nearly all ancient societies enculturate individuals to view the self as fundamentally collectivistic. People are so embedded in groups that the group and the individual are in large measure co-extensive, both psychologically and in every other way... Individuals are defined by the groups to which they belong and do not understand themselves as having a separate identity.” One wonders if Wisse is guilty of thinking about texts in fundamentally modern and Western categories in his vision of solitary individuals writing personal reflections (for a similar critique of contemporary New Testament scholarship in general, see Richard Rohrbaugh, “Ethnocentrism and Historical Questions about Jesus,” in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Wolfgang Stegemann *et al.* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002], 27-43).

depiction of that community. The text may not give a clear picture of the community out of which it emerged because a text can only give a partial glimpse of that community. In short, texts by their very nature are limited in what they can reveal about a social situation.¹⁰ Social systems and structures are complex phenomena that are constantly evolving.¹¹ Texts, on the other hand, are fixed in time and limited in scope.¹² Many factors inform the creation of a text—the complex interplay between authors and their culture alone give reason for pause—and it is difficult enough “to unravel these different contributing factors without extensive, direct access to them, let alone inferring them

¹⁰ Wisse, “Indirect Textual Evidence,” 215, writes, “Though early Christian and gnostic texts have been used extensively for [the purpose of historical reconstruction] in recent decades, insufficient attention has been given to what conclusions they actually can support, beyond mere speculation and educated guesses, about their anonymous and pseudonymous authors, the intended readers, and the historical situation in which, or for which they were written... [G]reat pressure has been put on them to provide historical evidence well beyond the direct evidence they contain.”

¹¹ My thinking on the dynamics of culture has been most deeply influenced by the dialectic proposed in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), later more fully developed with a particular focus on religion in Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967). On the contemporary relevance of their insights to contemporary study of early Christianity, see the brief article by David G. Horrell, “Berger and New Testament Studies,” in *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*, ed. Linda Whitehead with Paul Heelas and David Martin (London: Routledge, 2001), 142-53.

¹² Patrick Tillier (“The Sociological Settings of the Components of 1 Enoch,” in *The Early Enoch Literature*, ed. Garbiel Boccaccini and John Collins [Leiden: Brill, 2007], 237-55, here 237) helpfully compares sociological reconstruction on the basis of texts to posing biological questions about a rock—“It can be done—especially if the rock happens to be a fossil” (a similar comparison is employed by Wisse, “Indirect Textual Evidence,” 227). In this case, the fixed object with limited heuristic value (the rock, *if* it is a fossil) provides glimpses of a complex living organism. The simile is also helpful in that it demonstrates the limitations of texts. Fossilized teeth may help us understand an animal’s diet (carnivore, omnivore, herbivore, dietary deficiencies, etc.) but will reveal nothing about locomotion (biped or quadruped). Similarly, texts, depending on their type and purpose, are limited in the kinds of historical data they can provide. Wisse, “Indirect Textual Evidence,” 215-16, distinguishes between documentary and literary texts (the former being ephemeral and occasional, and therefore more valuable because they provide primary evidence). Wisse goes on to argue that New Testament and early Christian studies in the last 30 years of the 20th century have treated literary texts as if they were “quasi-documentary” (225), thus leading to several unjustified conclusions about the shape of early Christianity.

from the text.”¹³ The problem with extrapolating communities from texts extends beyond the fact that texts offer an incomplete perspective—a text may give an inaccurate depiction of the community as well. As Frederik Wisse writes,

It cannot be taken for granted that these [early Christian] texts, at the time they were composed, reflected the beliefs, practices, and situation of a wider community. An exhortative, religious writing would normally not express what is, i.e., the status quo of the situation in which it is written, but rather it would advocate what the author believes ought to be.¹⁴

In other words, it cannot be assumed that the authors are describing what *is* as much as what they hope *will be*. Moreover, and perhaps especially in that case of early Christian texts, the social situation is often deliberately (though not necessarily maliciously) skewed. Roger Bagnall observes,

...Christian polemicists had a tendency to carry on controversy by highly charged categorization; opponents were denounced by calling names. This tendency, which still thrives today, manifested itself, for example, in the use of “Manichean” as a term of abuse, not necessarily to be taken literally. In the fifth century, Shenoute routinely attacks pagans, Jews, and Arians, but how far these represent real groups of opponents it is hard to say... The perennial tendency to apply theological categories to disagreements over political power within the church only exacerbates the unreliability of ancient literature as a witness to contemporary realities.¹⁵

The difficulty of extrapolating communities and authors from texts is exacerbated in Gnostic works like the *Apocryphon of John* where concrete historical data is not

¹³ Wisse, “Indirect Textual Evidence,” 227.

¹⁴ Wisse, “Indirect Textual Evidence,” 219. A similar point is made by Piovaneli, “Sitting by the Waters,” 258, “Authors could deliberately adopt the perspectives of other religious or social groups different from the one to which they originally belong, or they could take up storylines and motifs that were originally used by other groups different from their own.” Complexities such as these add weight to Roger Bagnall’s (*Egypt in Late Antiquity* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993], 304) conclusion that “a text, or even a whole library of texts, does not make a sect or a community.”

¹⁵ Roger Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 305.

necessarily skewed, but particularly slim. As Bentley Layton writes, "...the data regarding the ancient Gnostics are sparse and survive out of context; are unrepresentative and come from tendentious sources; or else are pseudepigraphic mythography and completely disguise their real author, audience, and place, date, and reason of composition."¹⁶ All of these factors create a gap between implied community and real audience. This gap is so wide that Pierluigi Piovanelli concludes, "...nobody can confidently reconstruct either who the original author of a given text was, or his or her pristine intentions. Scholars can only guess about the chances that the images of the implied or ideal author and audience correspond, more or less, to some historical persons and situations."¹⁷

In sum, caution is necessary when reconstructing the social history of those who wrote and used the *Apocryphon of John*. This caution noted, the available evidence suggests that we are dealing with some form of a social movement.¹⁸ The multiple recensions of the *Apocryphon* provide a window into the development of that movement, however opaque that window may be.

The Geographical Spread of Ideas

¹⁶ Bentley Layton, "Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 334-50, here 334. A similar situation faces those who work with the Enochic corpus. For a helpful essay describing the issues, see James VanderKam, "Mapping Second Temple Judaism," in *The Early Enoch Literature*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini and John Collins (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1-20.

¹⁷ Piovanelli, "Sitting by the Waters," 258.

¹⁸ Layton, "Prolegomena," 347, in his argument that Gnostics were a Christian "species," also demonstrates that they were a social group, as evidenced in the universal identification as a αἵρεσις ("sect" or "school of thought"); "a complex and distinctive myth of origins; a strong expression of group identity; a special jargon or in-group language; and talk about a Gnostic initiatory sacrament of baptism."

The second methodological issue revolves around the how quickly and commonly texts and ideas were shared in the early centuries of the Christian movement. It has become commonplace in early Christian studies to assume that the earliest Christian communities were largely isolated from one another and that their literary works were generally unknown to each other.¹⁹ Although the reality of regional trajectories can scarcely be denied, too often in contemporary scholarship early Christian texts are interpreted in isolation from one another and without sufficient appreciation of interrelationships between various Christian communities. The surviving documentary evidence suggests that early Christian communities communicated regularly and that texts were quickly disseminated.²⁰

In general, letters traveled quite quickly and frequently throughout the Roman Empire. Eldon Epp reports that as early as the third century B.C.E., letters from Asia Minor reached Alexandria in two months.²¹ Letters that traveled shorter distances, such as Philadelphia to Syria (about 400 miles) or Memphis to Alexandria (about 125 miles),

¹⁹ See Bauckham, "For Whom," 10-11. Bauckham is writing about contemporary Gospel studies but this general proclivity applies more broadly to the study of early Christian literature of all genres. Two important works that pushed scholarship in this direction are Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); trans. of *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie, Band 10; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1934) and Helmut Koester, ΓΝΟΜΑΙ ΔΙΑΦΟΡΟΙ: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity," *HTR* 58 (1965): 279-318.

²⁰ This is to say nothing of the speed at which ideas spread. In addition to correspondence through letters, we have several reports of leaders in the church traveling frequently. Prior to the second century, 2 John 10-11, 3 John 3-8, and *Did.* 11:1-6 all presuppose itinerant preachers (the Apostle Paul, of course traveled widely). In the second century, have reports of several key leaders—such as Polycarp bishop of Smyrna, Abercius bishop of Hierapolis, Melito bishop of Sardis, Tatian from Syria, Valentinus from Alexandria, and Marcion from Pontus—all traveling across the Roman Empire. For more on this, see Bauckham, "For Whom," 36-38.

²¹ Eldon Epp, "The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart Ehrman and Michael Holmes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 3-21, here 9.

would only take two to three weeks.²² Although travel and communication were obviously not undertaken as quickly and easily as today,²³ communication by letter and courier was a common practice.²⁴ Early Christianity certainly was no exception. More 9,000 Christian letters from antiquity survive, leading Blake Leyerle to conclude, “From its very beginning, Christianity was a movement of letter writers.”²⁵

In addition to writing letters, early catholic heresiologists from all corners of the Roman Empire refuted Gnostic ideas and texts in large works, often borrowing arguments from one another. Irenaeus refuted the Gnostics as the bishop of Gaul, Tertullian wrote against Valentinus and other Gnostic-like heretics in Northern Africa, Hippolytus wrote his *Refutation of All Heresies* from Rome. This fact has two significant ramifications. First, it underscores the speed at which the ideas circulated and the broad reach of Gnostic texts. Within 50 years of the ideas, they were perceived to be enough of a threat throughout the Empire to merit a thorough response. The anti-heretical texts were then perceived to be important enough to preserve and distribute broadly. Second,

²² Ibid. Michael Thompson (“The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation,” in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998], 49-70, here 62-63) reports that messages sent by courier from Rome to Antioch would take about 40 days to arrive while messages from Syria to Rome could take as many as 100 days.

²³ Stressed by Thompson, “The Holy Internet,” 62-63. See also Blake Leyerle, “Communication and Travel,” in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip Esler (New York: Routledge, 2000), 452-74, here 452.

²⁴ Leyerle, “Communication and Travel,” 470, notes that the common complaints of failure to write demonstrates the frequency and ease with which letters traveled. Even when the arrival of a letter that was expected was delayed, the recipients assumed it had simply not been written. In the conclusion to the article, Leyerle also notes the frequency of travel metaphors in early Christian literature and argues that this suggests a relative ease of travel (472-73).

²⁵ Ibid., 469. A point also made by Bauckham, “For Whom,” 38 and Epp, “Papyrus Manuscripts,” 9.

it demonstrates the way in which texts were central to the communication of ideas. The heresiologists cite Gnostic texts at length, and as noted above borrow from each other as well.

This relative speed and frequency of the spread of texts is evidenced in the Gnostic literature as well. Documentary evidence shows that Thomasine and Johannine traditions, likely originating in Syria, found their way into Egypt within 50 years.²⁶ The *Apocryphon of John*, whose suggested places of origin are most likely Egypt²⁷ or Syria,²⁸ found its way into Rome within 30 years (and shortly thereafter to Gaul).²⁹

This rapid spread of texts and ideas across the Roman Empire has several implications on this study. First, with reference back to the initial discussion of community, any suggestion of regional parochialism must be looked upon with some skepticism. It is more likely that the *Apocryphon* was written for a broader audience and with an awareness of the diversity of Christian experience throughout the Roman Empire,

²⁶ For example, P⁵², the earliest known manuscript of the NT, contains portions of John 18 and is dated to the first half of the second century. Thus, in less than 50 years, some form of John was already present in Egypt. P. Oxy. 1 and P. Oxy. 65, Greek fragments of the *Gospel of Thomas*, can both be dated to the early third century, again within about 50 years of the text's autograph. The speed of the transmission of these two documents was first brought to my attention by David Frankfurter, "The Legacy of Jewish Apocalypses in Early Christianity: Regional Trajectories," in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity*, ed. James VanderKam and William Adler (CRINT III.4; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 129-200, here 151.

²⁷ Birger Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity*, 63, represents what I understand to be the general scholarly consensus.

²⁸ The strongest argument for Syrian Antioch comes from Alastair Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 29-30. See also Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 212-13.

²⁹ Recall that Irenaeus directly cites a long portion of the first third of the *Apocryphon* in *Adv. haer.* 1.29. Thus, that portion of the *Apocryphon*, likely originating in one of those far reaching locales in the middle of the second century, was available to Irenaeus in Rome within 30 years of its composition. Note that the suggestions are far ranging, thus giving indirect witness to the fact that ideas traveled far and wide in the Roman Empire and regions were not entirely distinct.

including polemical challenges. Likewise, the changes and alterations to the text could be rapidly disseminated. What Eldon Epp writes about the text of the New Testament is likely true for the *Apocryphon* as well:

...NT writings, wherever they might have originated in the vast Mediterranean region, could rapidly have made their way to any other part of that Roman world—in a matter of days or weeks. No longer therefore, do we have to assume a long interval of years between the time a NT letter or Gospel was written and its appearance in another place—even a far off place... [I]f NT texts reaching Egypt were modified during Christian use there, those “revisions,” again, could quickly be transferred to another part of the Christian world anywhere in the Roman Empire. Indeed, in the nature of things, one must grant that various forms of text in the early Christian world could not have been confined to one region for any length of time in any single form.³⁰

Second, because Christian texts in general were widely available, it is highly likely that the authors and audience of the *Apocryphon* formulated their ideas about God and the cosmos with several inputs. Within the text itself, influence from the Old Testament, Paul, and John are all evident. It would be unwise to assume, however, that only those texts that can be discerned in the *Apocryphon* had an impact on the community’s thinking, or that the views expressed in the *Apocryphon* were equivalent to those of the community.³¹ A social history of the community that used the *Apocryphon* must allow for the influence of broader Christian traditions. Third, and finally, although ideas and

³⁰ Epp, “Papyrus Manuscripts,” 9.

³¹ James Dunn (*Jesus Remembered* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003], 150-51), in his critique of contemporary Gospels scholarship, identifies a perspective such as this as the “one document per community” fallacy.” Dunn argues,

“It simply will not do to identify the character of a community with the character of the document associated with it. Such a document will no doubt indicate concerns and emphases in the community’s teaching. But only if we can be confident that the single document was the community’s sole document... could we legitimately infer that the concerns and beliefs of the community did not extend beyond those of the document.”

texts did travel far quite quickly, the reality of regional diversity does not lose all of its heuristic force, particularly in discussions of reception. We may not be able to pinpoint with certainty whence an idea arose, but we can use our awareness of regional proclivities to better understand how a text would have been heard in that context.

The Apocryphon of John in the Second Century

The Shape of the *Apocryphon* circa 150 CE³²

Scholars are in general agreement that some recognizable form of the *Apocryphon* was available by the middle of the second century.³³ As noted in chapter one, by 180 CE, Irenaeus had access to at the very least some form of the first major section of the text (NHC II 4,34-14,13 and pars.) that he condensed and summarized in *Adv. haer.* 1.29. Beyond that certainty, some reconstruction of the earliest form of the *Apocryphon* requires reasonable conjecture.

It is likely, as Alastair Logan has argued, that Irenaeus had access to much more of the *Apocryphon* but chose not to cite it.³⁴ Logan demonstrates that Irenaeus' first book of *Adv. haer.* is an attempt to refute the Valentinian system. The portion of the *Apocryphon* that Irenaeus cites is a clear articulation of a cosmogony and theogony that

³² The choice of 150 CE is somewhat arbitrary. The key point to note is that a recognizable form of the *Apocryphon* was in circulation prior to Irenaeus.

³³ See, e.g., King, *Secret Book*, 16-17; Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 24; Logan, *Gnostic Truth*; Pearson, "Mikra"; Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques*; Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*. Waldstein and Wisse, *Synopsis*, 1, date the *Apocryphon* to the early third century, arguing that the part of the *Apocryphon* that Irenaeus quotes at length was a distinct text that was later used as a source by the authors of the *Apocryphon*.

³⁴ Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 42-43.

has affinities with Valentinian ideas.³⁵ Because what follows in the *Apocryphon* lacks a clear consort for Sophia (as opposed to what is described in *Adv. haer.* 1.30, which looks “much more like the Valentinian Achamoth as sister of Christ”³⁶), Irenaeus chose to use another source. Ialdabaoth’s arrogant boast at the end of the section (NHC II 13,8-9//*Adv. haer.* 1.29.4) is a natural transition point (both in the *Apocryphon* and *Adv. haer.*) to the creation of the earthly Adam as depicted in *Adv. haer.* 1.30. “Thus,” Logan concludes, “while the theogony and cosmogony of 1.29 is much more akin to the Valentinian system Irenaeus is attempting to refute, in the case of anthropology and soteriology the myth of 1.30 is more germane.”³⁷

Irenaeus gives us further clues as to the shape of the *Apocryphon* in the mid to late second century. At the end of his citation of the cosmogony, Irenaeus reports that after Sophia saw the offspring of Chief Ruler (i.e., Ialdabaoth), “[she] was grieved and fled, retreating to the upper regions (*Mater Sophia contristata refugit et in altiora secessit*)...”³⁸ The parallel passage in all the versions of the *Apocryphon* insert at this point the first rejection of Moses’ account, introduced by a question by John: “Lord, what (is meant by) ἐπιφανε?” The question is spurred by the biblical allusion immediately preceding. As discussed in chapter two, in the *Apocryphon* Sophia’s movement is

³⁵ Given the previous discussion of the relatively quick and broad geographical spread of ideas, cross fertilization between Valentinian and other Gnostic ideas must have been inevitable. In this case, the sharing of ideas is particularly likely given the similar theological perspectives.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Logan continues, “[Irenaeus] probably included the theogony and cosmogony of 1.30 because of the relevance of the speculations about Man, Son of Man, and Church, and Sophia split into higher and lower, with Christ the son of the higher and brother of the lower being caught up into heaven.”

³⁸ *Adv. haer.* 1.29.4.

described using the language of the LXX, “moving to and fro.” Note the shift here from Irenaeus’ description of Sophia’s movement as a “flight” to the upper regions. It appears that Irenaeus’ version lacked the biblical allusion and the subsequent attack on Moses’ credibility. As will be discussed shortly, part of Irenaeus “overthrow” of the Gnostics is an insistence that they twist, distort, and ultimately reject the scriptures. If his source had this passage, it would be excellent fodder for his argument. It is hard to imagine he would avoid the opportunity to draw attention to this distortion and rejection (even if in another section of his refutation) if his source contained it.

That this rejection of Moses is likely a later addition is further supported by the fact that the brief dialogue that ensues between the revealer and John can be easily cut out without disrupting the flow of the narrative. When NHC II 13,13-32 (the dialogue about ἐπιφανε) is removed, the text very naturally reads,

...[Ialdabaoth] said to them, “I am a jealous God, and there is no other God beside me.” But by announcing this he indicated to the angels who attended him that there exists another God. For if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous? [excised dialogue] And when the mother recognized that the garment of darkness was imperfect, then she knew that her consort had not agreed with her. She repented with much weeping.³⁹

This observation, coupled with Irenaeus’ distinct translation, provides strong evidence that the dialogue about the reliability of Moses’ account is likely secondary.

Moreover, each of the corrections of Moses can be similarly removed without impact to the narrative. Note the flow of the *Apocryphon* (NHC II 22, 3-23,8 and pars.) without the corrections of Moses (the excised dialogue between the savior and John is found in the footnotes):

³⁹ NHC II 13,8-13 and 13,32-14,1 (trans. Waldstein and Wisse).

But what they call the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which is the Epinoia of the light, they stayed in front of it in order that he (Adam) might not look up to his fullness and recognize the nakedness of his shamefulness.⁴⁰ And it was I who brought about that they ate. And he (the Chief Ruler) knew that he was disobedient to him (the Chief Ruler) due to light of the Epinoia which is in him, which made him more correct in his thinking than the Chief Ruler. And (the latter) wanted to bring about the power which he himself had given him. And he brought a 'trance' over Adam.⁴¹

Then the Epinoia of the light hid herself in him (Adam). And the chief archon wanted to bring her out of his rib. But the Epinoia of the light cannot be grasped. Although darkness pursued her, it did not catch her. And he brought a part of his power out of him. And he made another creature, in the form of a woman, according to the likeness of the Epinoia which had appeared to him.⁴² And he (Adam) saw the woman beside him. And in that moment the luminous Epinoia appeared, and she lifted the veil which lay over his mind. And he became sober from the drunkenness of darkness.

Note that in this brief section there are three explicit corrections of Moses. The final correction is with regards to the figure of Noah (NHC II 28,32-29,12 and pars.):

And he repented for everything which had come into being through him. This time he plotted to bring a flood upon the work of man. But the greatness of the light of the Providence informed Noah, and he preached to all the offspring which are the sons of men. But those who were strangers to him did not listen to him.⁴³ They went into a place and hid themselves in a luminous cloud. And he (Noah) recognized his authority, and she who belongs to the light was with him, having shone on them because he (the Chief Archon) had brought darkness upon the whole earth.

⁴⁰ NHC II 22,9-15: And I said to the savior, "Lord, was it not the serpent that taught Adam to eat?" The savior smiled and said, "The serpent taught them to eat from wickedness of begetting, lust, (and) destruction, that he (Adam) might be useful to him" (trans. Waldstein and Wisse).

⁴¹ NHC II 22,21-28: And I said to the savior, "What is the forgetfulness?" And he said "It is not the way Moses wrote (and) you heard. For he said in his first book, 'He put him to sleep' (Gn 2:21), but (it was) in his perception. For indeed he said through the prophet, 'I will make their hearts heavy, that they may not pay attention and may not see' (Is 6:10)" (trans. Waldstein and Wisse).

⁴² NHC II 22,36-23,4: And he brought the part which he had taken from the power of the man into the female creature, and not as Moses said, "his rib-bone" (trans. Waldstein and Wisse).

⁴³ NHC II 29,6-10: It is not as Moses said, "They hid themselves in an ark," but they hid themselves in a place, not only Noah, but also many other people from the immovable race (trans. Waldstein and Wisse).

In sum then, each of the explicit corrections of Moses can be fairly easily removed without significantly (if at all) disturbing the narrative.

The fact that the dialogues can be removed without impacting the narrative is not enough evidence to finally prove that they are secondary. However, the fact that the dialogues introduce certain problems and inconsistencies into the narrative makes it more likely that the corrections are in fact later additions. Moreover, these aporia are easily solved if the corrections are removed. The most obvious case is that of Sophia's repentance. The appearance of the discussion about $\epsilon\pi\iota\phi\epsilon\rho\epsilon$ leads to a repeated description of Sophia's repentance and Ialdabaoth's boast (compare NHC II 13,5-17 and 13,27-36). When 13,13-32 (which consists primarily of the correction of Moses) is removed, the problem of the doublet is eliminated.⁴⁴ A similar problem is introduced in the explanation of Adam's trance (NHC II 22,21-23,4). The role and presence of Epinoia is multiplied to the point that her role in the narrative becomes confusing. Remove the discussion of the trance and the rib and this problem is solved.⁴⁵

In sum, the corrections to Moses are likely secondary for the following reasons: 1) Irenaeus shows no awareness of them; 2) they can be easily removed without any noticeable change to the narrative; and 3) they introduce aporia into the text. What then is to be said of the other points of dialogue in the *Apocryphon*? It is likely that the opening and closing frame, which creates the possibility for dialogue is likely secondary,

⁴⁴ Brought to my attention by Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 144.

⁴⁵ For further, see Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 226-28.

as are the seven questions asked by John in NHC II 25,16-30,11.⁴⁶ The earliest form of the *Apocryphon*, then, appears to be an extended cosmogony and theogony, followed by an anthropogony that is essentially a rewriting of Genesis 1-4. The excerpt from the so-called “book of Zoroaster” (NHC II 15,29-19,10) and the final hymn (NHC II 30,11-31,25), both unique to NHC II, were not likely present in the earliest version of the *Apocryphon*.⁴⁷

The *Apocryphon of John* as Rewritten Scripture

Chapter two explored the structural and linguistic features of the *Apocryphon* that suggest it is best categorized as rewritten scripture.⁴⁸ This section will briefly explore the significance of the earliest phase of the *Apocryphon* when it would have most closely resembled other pieces of rewritten scripture, particularly as it relates to the perceived authority of the biblical text.⁴⁹ Put simply, the fact that the *Apocryphon* is rewritten

⁴⁶ A position taken by Giversen, *Apocryphon Johannis*, 266; Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 239, reiterated on p. 259; Pearson, “Mikra in Gnostic Literature,” 648-49.

⁴⁷ For similar reconstructions see Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 29-69, with a chart summarizing his reconstruction on pp. 55-56 and Pearson, “Mikra in Gnostic Literature,” 649. Recall that Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques*, 35 (discussed above in chapter two, n. 104), sees the final dialogue between the savior and John as part of the basic structure of the *Apocryphon*, functioning like a Rabbinic catechism. Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 261, suggests that it is possible that the final teaching section was indeed integral to the original text, but that the dialogue format is secondary.

⁴⁸ See chapter two, esp. pp. 78-81 above.

⁴⁹ Much has been written on the interpretive function of rewritten scripture. Some of the more influential articles that informed this dissertation include Philip Alexander, “Retelling the Old Testament,” in *It Is Written : Scripture Citing Scripture: Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars*, SSF, ed. Donald A. Carson and H.G.M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 99-121; Michael Fishbane, “Inner-Biblical Exegesis,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Vol 1, From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (until 1300). Pt 1, Antiquity*, ed. Magne Saebø, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 33-48; Bruce Fisk, “Rewritten Bible in Pseudepigrapha and Qumran,” in *DNTB*, 944-48; George Nickelsburg, “The Bible Rewritten and Expanded,” in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus*, ed. Michael Stone (CRINT 2; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984), 89-156.

scripture does not in any way undermine the authority of the scriptures it recasts and reformulates. As with other examples of rewritten scripture, “The purpose of the revision is exegetical, that is, to explain and interpret the original text for a new (presumably later) audience... [and] to make the text of Scripture adaptable and relevant to the contemporary situation.”⁵⁰

To begin, it is important to draw attention again to the fact that the explicit corrections of Moses are not present in the earliest form of the *Apocryphon*. There is nothing explicit to suggest that Moses is wrong. Thus, all the features of the *Apocryphon* that implicitly betray deep engagement with the scriptures (such as structural similarities, verbatim agreement, and allusions) assume that the reader will be able to recognize them as such.⁵¹ In his discussion of explicit and implicit citation of scripture, Louis Painchaud writes,

The implicit use of Scripture, on the contrary, “is not indicated by explicit formal markers. Its identification depends on the ability of the reader to recognize the scriptural elements and to see their meaning in the new context.” This is of central importance: implicit quotations or allusions are meaningful only if they are recognized as such by the reader. As a rhetorical device, they are intended to create complicity between the author and the reader, a function which is completely different from that of explicit quotations.⁵²

⁵⁰ Sidnie White Crawford, *Rewriting Scripture in Second Temple Times* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 3.

⁵¹ With reference to what is expected of the reader in rewritten scripture, Bruce Fisk, “Rewritten Bible,” 945, writes, “[R]eaders of rewritten Bible would be expected to recognize and recall the underlying biblical narrative, even if they were not sure where the embellishments began and ended.”

⁵² Painchaud, “The Use of Scripture in Gnostic Literature,” 135, citing Devorah Dimant, “Use and Interpretation of Mikra,” 400.

For the complicity between reader and author to take place, the reader must be familiar with the text to which the author refers. Deep familiarity with the biblical text on the part of the reader is essential; otherwise there is nothing to be shared. Because there is no explicit rejection of Moses, such complicity is encouraged.

The fact that the biblical text has been rewritten does not necessarily imply that it has been replaced or is no longer authoritative.⁵³ However, the rewritten text will in some ways claim the same authority as the scripture it is expanding upon.⁵⁴ Sidnie White Crawford provides a helpful continuum with which to evaluate a given text's relationship to its biblical exemplar.⁵⁵ On one end of the spectrum are those texts which are essentially a harmonization of contradictions and omissions. No extra-biblical materials are introduced—the one part of the base text is simply harmonized to another in order to smooth out perceived differences. Texts on this end of the continuum make strong claims about the authority of the Bible and assume (and are generally given) that authority for themselves. Crawford identifies the Samaritan Pentateuch as a prime example of this type of rewritten scripture. The next part of the continuum is marked by those texts that introduce new material from outside the base text. The intention, however, is not to create a new composition. Rather, the base text is simply expanded. As Crawford explains, “These texts are making the same claim to authority as their base

⁵³ In fact, it is usually the opposite. Fisk, “Rewritten Bible,” 948, explains, “Although the storyline is largely intelligible without prior biblical knowledge, works of rewritten Bible do not seek to displace scripture but rather offer a fuller, smoother version of the sacred story.”

⁵⁴ Crawford, *Rewriting Scripture*, 12.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

texts, but whether these claims were universally accepted is a matter of some doubt.”⁵⁶

The so-called “Reworked Pentateuch” is used as an example. Next on the spectrum are those compositions in which the rewriting of the base text and the introduction of new material is so extensive that a new work is created. The base text is still identifiable, “but the new work has a separate purpose or theological *tendenz*.”⁵⁷ Texts in this part of the continuum claim the authority of the base text, but that authority will be only accepted by a few groups, if any. Crawford cites *Jubilees* and the Temple Scroll from Qumran as key examples. On the farthest end of the continuum are those texts that have a recognizable base text and use many of the techniques involved in “innerscriptural” exegesis but they do not claim the same authority as that of the base text, and no community is known to have accorded it to them. The Genesis Apocryphon is presented as a case in point.⁵⁸

In the case of the earliest form of the *Apocryphon of John*, it falls within the third or fourth areas of the continuum. Most significantly, the claim of the text’s authority vis-à-vis the base text in these two groups is weakest. In other words, for the *Apocryphon* in this early stage, the Bible is a distinct work that maintains its authority. The *Apocryphon*,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁸ Crawford also speaks of a fifth group of texts that fit outside of the definition of rewritten scripture. She labels this group “parabiblical texts.” They are defined as texts that “use a passage, event, or character from a scriptural work as a ‘jumping off’ point to create a new narrative or work.” Examples of this type of text would be *I Enoch*, *Life of Adam and Eve*, and *Joseph and Asenath*. Some of these may have made a claim to authority, and their reception as such is mixed. For further, see Crawford, *Rewritten Scripture*, 14-15.

then, is a narrative that offers an interpretation of the creation narrative without the intention of replacing or superseding it.⁵⁹

The *Apocryphon of John* in Early Christian Communities

Scholars of early Christianity are in general agreement that in the middle of the second century the lines between orthodoxy and heterodoxy were fairly blurred. Speaking of the Egyptian context, Birger Pearson writes, “To speak of any sharp distinction between heresy and orthodoxy in early Christian Egypt is an anachronism, at least until the end of the second century and, in some parts of Egypt, much later.”⁶⁰ We know that this is certainly true of the Roman context, where Valentinus, whose views are very closely related to those expressed in the *Apocryphon*, led and taught within the Roman church for at least 15 years, and was never excommunicated.⁶¹ In Antioch, even as late as the fourth and fifth century, Theodore of Mopsuestia reports that he could not

⁵⁹ Pearson, “Mikra in Gnostic Literature,” 649. PHEME PERKINS, “Gnosticism and the Christian Bible,” 361-63, continues to maintain that even at the very latest stages of development, Gnostic texts like the *Apocryphon* never replaced the biblical texts they were interpreting.

⁶⁰ Pearson, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, 24.

⁶¹ Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 385-96, spells out the tolerance of various theological positions in Rome. He notes that according to Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3.4.3, Valentinus arrived ca. 136-40 CE and left ca. 155-66. Lampe further offers five pieces of evidence that demonstrate Valentinus’ general acceptance in Rome in the middle of the second century: 1) Irenaeus mentions in the preface to *Adv. haer.* 4 that other authors had not been able to successfully refute Valentinus; 2) Justin does not mention Valentinus in his *Apology* (both 1 and 2) and perhaps even praises Ptolemy in *Apol.* 2.2; yet in his *Dialogue* 10 years later, he attacks Valentinus; 3) Traditions in Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.* 3.4.3) and Epiphanius (*Pan.* 31) suggest that Valentinus was seen as orthodox by some; 4) Anti-Valentinian authors are much less common than anti-Marcionite writers in the second century; and 5) Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.* 3.15.2) reports that even in 180 CE, Valentinians still gave lectures to “orthodox” Christians, and were surprised when Irenaeus told them to stop. The general acceptance of Valentinus in Rome is noted also by Colin Roberts, *Manuscript and Belief in Early Christianity*, 50. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 220, draws attention to a report that Valentinus was so widely accepted that he expected to be chosen to be the bishop of Rome.

distinguish Gnostics from early catholics.⁶² In short, early Christianity in the second century was quite diverse and more or less accepting of Gnostic ideas, without perceiving any threat to the faith.

In this context, the earliest stage of the *Apocryphon* functioned as rewritten scripture; it was a text to be read alongside Genesis as a true interpretation of Moses' creation account. The interpretation, to be sure, may have been odd or unfamiliar to some but not so distinct so as to justify postulating a distinct Gnostic or "proto-Gnostic" community.⁶³ One can envision early Christians who used the text and found it enlightening comfortably worshipping alongside other Christians who would have found the ideas difficult to follow. The fecundity of the early Gnostic hermeneutic would allow for the two groups to hear the same text read or sermon preached yet walk away with quite distinct ideas about the meaning of the message.

The *Apocryphon of John* after Irenaeus of Lyons

The key change in the *Apocryphon*'s treatment of the biblical text occurred in the late second and early third century CE. Gnostics and other early Christians up to this point (and in many cases afterward, as noted above) lived and worshiped side by side without issue. The key turning point was the publication and dissemination of Irenaeus

⁶² Noted by Layton, "Prolegomena," 347. At this late date, with Christianity having become the official religion of the Roman Empire, Gnostics would have reason to try to find ways to be inconspicuous.

⁶³ Cf. Pearson, "Mikra in Gnostic Literature," 649. In his description of the earliest stage of the *Apocryphon*, Pearson compares it to the *Book of Jubilees*: "If, for example, the *Book of Jubilees* is a rewriting of Genesis 1-Exodus 14 for the purpose of presenting an alternative sectarian halakha, the Urtext of the *Apocryphon* is a rewriting and expansion of Genesis 1-7 for the purpose of presenting an alternative, sectarian myth...." While this is certainly a possibility, particularly in later stages, I would argue that the earliest rewriting of the text was simply to present an alternative myth. The creation of the myth had no sectarian intent. The object was to interpret the biblical text and in such a way that the problem of evil could be explained.

of Lyons' *Adversus haeresis* around 180 CE. In this five volume work, Irenaeus aimed to discredit the various Gnostic theological systems, especially those of the Valentinians. In addition to various critiques about the logic of their ideas, Irenaeus paid particular attention to their use of scripture. The response of the authors of the *Apocryphon* was to further distance themselves from early catholics, in part by challenging the authority of the Bible.

Irenaeus' Assault on "Knowledge Falsely So-Called"

Irenaeus was a native of Asia Minor who in 177 CE became the bishop of Lyon. He was part of a delegation to Rome and maintained contact with and influence on Victor, the bishop of Rome (ca. 189-99).⁶⁴ Although previous authors had attempted to refute Gnostic ideas, none were as successful as Irenaeus. In the preface to book IV of *Adv. haer.*, Irenaeus reports that previous authors (who were "much superior men" to him) were unable to effectively refute the Valentinians because they did not have sufficient awareness of Valentinian doctrines.⁶⁵ Irenaeus' work spread quickly

⁶⁴ This biographical evidence about Irenaeus is scattered throughout Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.3-27.

⁶⁵ Without over-psychoanalyzing, one may wonder if Irenaeus' "much superior" predecessors also had the dogged determination to root out what he perceived to be a great threat to the early catholic church. The episode with the Valentinian Florinus is illustrative. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.20 recounts a letter sent from Irenaeus to Florinus, then a presbyter in Rome (5.20.4). In the letter, Irenaeus claims that Florinus's ideas are opinions (δόγματα) that "not even the heretics outside of the church ever dared to proclaim" (5.20.4; trans. Lake, *LCL*). Florinus had to this point functioned in his ministry under Bishop Victor without episode (he is not yet "outside the church"). However, after pressure from Irenaeus, Victor stripped Florinus of his position (5.15). It is remarkable that Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, imposed his will upon Victor, bishop of Rome, who was otherwise not bothered by his beliefs (Irenaeus makes a general claim that heterodox presbyters ought to be ostracized in *Adv. haer.* 4.26.3-4). As Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 389, writes, "It was quite a long time before Victor took offense at Florinus. Significant is the manner in which that occurred. First, an *outsider*, Irenaeus from Gaul, incited Victor to intervene against Florinus and to suppress his writings... Victor 'obeyed'..."

throughout the Empire—it is possible that in as few as 10 years *Adv. haer.* had made its way into Egypt.⁶⁶

The first two books of Irenaeus' refutation offer a detailed critique of Gnostic systems, books three and four present a positive case for early catholic doctrine, and book five addresses three key doctrinal issues related to an affirmation of this world and therefore the one God who created it.⁶⁷ In all books, the proper use of the scriptures is central to Irenaeus' argument.

Irenaeus begins *Adv. haer.* with the claim that “certain people who have set the truth aside (*ueritatem refutantes quidam*)” now lead people into captivity. These same men, he continues, “falsify the words of the Lord (*falsantes uerba Domini*),” showing themselves to be “evil interpreters of the good words (*interpretatores mali eorum quae bene dicta*).”⁶⁸ Thus, in his opening salvo, Irenaeus places the proper interpretation of scripture in the forefront.⁶⁹ He will accuse the Gnostics of misrepresenting (*calumniare*),⁷⁰ disgracing (*infamare*),⁷¹ and changing (*transferre*)⁷² the scriptures.

⁶⁶ Roberts, *Manuscript and Belief*, 53, notes that P²³, a fragment of *Adv. haer.* found its way into Egypt before 250 CE (P. Oxy. iii, 405). Roberts (who, admittedly, tends to date manuscripts rather early) postulates that the hand may be dated to ca. 190, shortly after the work was penned. Given the previous discussion of the communication of ideas, the dissemination of the text may have been even faster. This means that Irenaeus' divisive arguments were quickly available to early catholics and Gnostics, and the shift in the tone of the *Apocryphon* could have been introduced before the turn of the third century.

⁶⁷ This summary is informed by Drobner, *Fathers of the Church*, 119.

⁶⁸ *Adv. haer. praef.* 1.

⁶⁹ This would be one of Irenaeus' lasting contributions to the heresiological discussions that would follow. Indeed, as Hubertus Drobner, *Fathers of the Church*, 120, writes, “The criteria for orthodox churches are two concepts Irenaeus introduces: *canon veritatis* (“canon of truth”) and *regula fidei* (“rule of faith”)... Irenaeus thus established the foundations of theological and ecclesiastical criteria for truth, ecclesiology, and the theology of primacy that endure to the present day.”

⁷⁰ *Adv. haer.* 1.9.1.

In books three and four, Irenaeus turns to the scriptures to defend his doctrinal positions. At the outset of book three, he declares that the scriptures “will be the ground and pillar of our faith (*fundamentum et columnam fidei nostrae futurum*).”⁷³ He then goes on to work to demonstrate how the scriptures affirm early catholic beliefs.⁷⁴ Implicit in these books, and sometimes explicitly stated, is the assertion that the heretics reject the authority of the Bible. In *Adv. haer.* 3.2, he charges them of finding fault with the scriptures, as if they were neither correct nor authoritative.⁷⁵ They are just as unlikely to consent to the scripture as to tradition.⁷⁶ This is in spite of the fact that the scriptures are reliable.⁷⁷

From this small survey, it is evident that a key component of Irenaeus’ argument against the Gnostics involved the assertion that they did not give due credence to the

⁷¹ *Adv. haer.* 1.9.3.

⁷² *Adv. haer.* 1.9.4. This is the famous passage where Irenaeus accuses the Gnostics of turning the king into the image of a fox. See also 1.18.1 (*transformare*), 2 *praef.*1 (*adaptare*).

⁷³ *Adv. haer.* 3.1.1. A similar sentiment is found in his letter to Florinus (*apud* Eusebius, *Hist eccl.* 5.20.6).

⁷⁴ In *Adv. haer.* 3.5.1, Irenaeus announces that he will now turn to the scriptural proofs handed down by the apostles in the books that would later become the New Testament. 3.6 offers several proofs from what would later become the Old Testament. 3.9-12 uses the Gospels and Acts to show how scripture informed their theological premises. In 4.26, Irenaeus insists that true understanding of the scriptures is to be found only in the early catholic church.

⁷⁵ *Adv. haer.* 3.2.1 reads, *Cum enim ex Scripturis arguuntur, in accusationem conuertuntur ipsarum Scripturarum, quasi non recte habeant neque sint ex auctoritate.*

⁷⁶ *Adv. haer.* 3.2.2.

⁷⁷ In addition to repeatedly making claims about the trustworthiness of the scriptures, Irenaeus also recounts the popular legend of the translation of the LXX (3.21.2-3). In a clear attempt to affirm the reliability of the LXX, Jews (and later Christians) alleged that 72 elders translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek in 72 days. Without any collaboration, they remarkably emerged from their cells with identical translations. See also Philo, *Vita Mos.* 2.33-44 and Justin Martyr, *To the Greeks* 13. *The Letter of Aristeas*, esp. 301-11, and Josephus, *Ant.* 12.12-118 have a much less remarkable account. Aristobulus, Frag. 4 (*apud* Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 13.12.1-2) simply reports that the LXX was translated during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (284-46 BCE).

biblical text. Because Irenaeus had the *Apocryphon* available to him, and refuted a large portion of it (in addition to other doctrines that are clearly present in it), we can assume that those who found the *Apocryphon* instructive and read or heard Irenaeus' broad and sweeping condemnation would have seen it as an assault on them as well.

The Gnostic Response

Although the treatment of the biblical text in the earliest stage of the *Apocryphon* does not match Irenaeus' rather libelous depiction, with rewritten scripture there is always the possibility that the base text loses some of its authority.⁷⁸ Following Irenaeus' thoroughgoing assault (both with pen and deed), it appears that those who found the *Apocryphon* instructive for faith and life responded by becoming more fully the caricature that he had painted in *Adversus haereses*. Whereas prior to Irenaeus' work the *Apocryphon* contained no explicit hint of criticism of the Genesis account of creation, after his refutation Moses becomes the object of scorn. One's attitude towards the authority of the biblical text becomes an identity marker and five explicit corrections of Moses are introduced. The critique of Moses is a critique on the early catholic Christians.⁷⁹

Moses is a logical object of scorn for several reasons. First, since the *Apocryphon* is originally a rewriting of Genesis 1-4, the person that is most readily available for critique is Moses. Second, early catholics found Moses' books to be particularly

⁷⁸ This is on account of the fact that the rewritten text is claiming similar authority.

⁷⁹ A similar point is made by Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 144-45.

authoritative.⁸⁰ Third, and related, Irenaeus cites Moses at numerous points, both to demonstrate the folly of the Gnostics and the authority of the biblical text.⁸¹ The corrections of Moses, then, serve to distance the Gnostics who used the *Apocryphon* from early catholics in general and Irenaeus in particular.

Two features of the corrections of Moses are worth noting. First, as discussed above in chapter three, the corrections of Moses are largely rhetorical. In general, the disagreement with Moses' account is insubstantial. The authors of the *Apocryphon* are not so much as disagreeing with Moses as simply saying they disagree. This will be significant in the next section when we see the authors of the *Apocryphon* returning to the biblical text to mine it for insight. Second, in the corrections themselves, the authors introduce new identity markers that create a clearer distinction between Gnostics and early catholics. This is seen most easily in two of the corrections: Sophia's repentance and Noah's place of hiding. Each will be briefly discussed in turn.

Sophia's Repentance Revisited

Alastair Logan has noted that Irenaeus' report of Sophia's retreat in *Adv. haer.* 1.29.4 precedes Ialdabaoth's arrogant boast.⁸² In Irenaeus, Sophia is active and unrepentant but in the extant version of the *Apocryphon*, she is passive and unable to rectify the situation. Logan suggests that this later development of Sophia is the result of a harmonization of "the earlier Barbelognostic Sophia [seen in Irenaeus], who acts

⁸⁰ On this, see William Horbury, "Old Testament Interpretation," 762-63.

⁸¹ See, e.g., *Adv. haer.* 1.18, 3.11.7, 3.15.3, and 4.2.

⁸² Much of what follows is informed by Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 144-45.

without a partner, with the more passive, repentant, Valentinian-influenced figure of the *Apocryphon*, who needs her partner...”⁸³ This new depiction of Sophia can then be tied into the correction of Moses that follows, and accounts for the change in the order of Ialdabaoth’s boast and Sophia’s repentance.

What is significant about this shift is that the authors of the *Apocryphon* are more closely aligning their understanding of Sophia with Valentinian ideas. It appears that the original version of the *Apocryphon* (or at least the version that Irenaeus had access to) did have some Valentinian proclivities—although Irenaeus works to create various “family trees” of the heretics, he can also lump them altogether to make sweeping judgments about their relationship to the biblical text and the *regula fidei*. As a result of Irenaeus’ broad condemnation, the *Apocryphon* underwent a Valentinian reinterpretation.⁸⁴ Whereas previously those who read and studied the *Apocryphon* would have worshiped with and more or less identified as early catholics, they now, upon reading or hearing the severe rebuke from Irenaeus, formed closer alliances with Valentinian Christians. The new Valentinian understanding of Sophia is introduced with the rejection of Moses’ account.

Noah’s Guiding Light

The final correction of Moses (NHC II 29,6-12 and pars.) offers another glimpse into the way in which early catholic thinking was challenged. When describing the flood,

⁸³ Ibid., 144.

⁸⁴ Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, argues that the *Apocryphon* first underwent a shift toward Valentinian ideas before undergoing a Sethian revision. For more on the Valentinian elements of the *Apocryphon*, see Gilles Quispel, “Valentinian Gnosis and the *Apocryphon of John*,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 118-32.

the savior corrects Moses by saying that Noah did not hide in an ark (κιβωτός) but that they sheltered themselves in a luminous cloud. By the end of the second century CE, the ark was becoming a common image for the early catholic church as a place of refuge from the chaos of the world.⁸⁵ In lieu of the ark as the place of salvation, the authors of the *Apocryphon* identify a luminous cloud as the place of salvation for the “immovable race.”⁸⁶ This ties the correction to several Gnostic identity markers. As David Brakke notes,

[I]n the resulting version, the story of the flood becomes even more one about the renewal of creation in the face of the destructive force of the ruler. Salvation of the immovable race from the “darkness” covering the earth in a “luminous cloud” with illuminating “light” alludes... to the struggle between “light” and “darkness” that drives the *Secret Book*’s own account of the origin of the material world and pervades the final poem of deliverance. It ties the flood story, in a way familiar from other early Christian writings (e.g., 1 Pet 3:20-22), to Gnostic baptism...⁸⁷

In short, the correction of Moses reframes the flood narrative such that the early catholic church’s salvific function is nullified, the group identity of the Gnostics is strengthened, and the Gnostic myth and ritual are reaffirmed.

⁸⁵ David Brakke, “The Seed of Seth at the Flood,” in *Reading in Christian Communities: Essays on Interpretation in the Early Church*, ed. Charles Bobertz and David Brakke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 41-61, here 57, argues similarly. On the ark as a symbol of the church in early Christianity, see Jack Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 161-66; *idem*, “Noah and the Flood in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Tradition,” *BA* 47 (1984): 224-39. Second and third century texts that use the ark as a symbol for the church include Tertullian, *on Idolatry* 24; *Bapt.* 8.4; Origen, *In Gen. hom.* 2; Cyprian, *Ep.* 74.15. Justin, *Dial.* 138, who bears witness to an earlier tradition, interprets the ark as a type of the cross.

This episode is closely paralleled in *Par. Shem* 24,29-26,36. A tower is constructed to protect a demon (Noah) from the onslaught of darkness. In Hermas’ *Shepherd* 3.3.5, the church is depicted as a tower. Shem stands outside the cloud of light (outside the church?) so that he might wait patiently for faith. *Par. Shem* appears to be locating its community within the church but outside of it somehow.

⁸⁶ Discussed above in chapter three, pp. 104-06 and esp. 112-14.

⁸⁷ Brakke, “The Seed of Seth,” 57.

In sum, in the wake of Irenaeus' scathing criticism of the Gnostic mythology, the authors of the *Apocryphon* responded by inserting explicit criticisms of Moses and the biblical account.⁸⁸ These denigrations served to distance the Gnostics from their early catholic counterparts and to reinforce group identity. As will be seen, the disparagement of Moses is largely superficial, and later users of the *Apocryphon* still found his books worth reading and studying. Attention will now be directed toward this final stage in the *Apocryphon's* development.

The *Apocryphon of John* at Nag Hammadi

The final stage in the development of the *Apocryphon* to be explored is the state in which the extant text comes to us. The text survives in two recensions, both of which were translated (independently) into Coptic. The manuscripts can be fairly confidently dated to the mid-late fourth century CE. They are part of a larger corpus (13 codices with 46 texts) that was found buried near a Pachomian Monastery in 1945.⁸⁹ The criticism of Moses notwithstanding, the texts betray a continued deep engagement with scripture.

Two Versions

The presence of divergent versions of the *Apocryphon* in the Nag Hammadi cache raises certain questions about how these texts were used and transmitted. The first obvious issue is the fact that there are two distinct versions with certain theological tendencies. The shorter version (represented by NHC III and BG) does not contain the

⁸⁸ It is also at this point that the frame story and the figure of John (and thus his dialogue with the savior) were likely introduced. This gave the *Apocryphon* an apostolic witness to their claims. For a similar argument, see Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 44.

⁸⁹ On the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, see James Robinson, "Introduction," in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 1-26.

long melothesia section and the final hymn to Pronoia. The longer version (found in NHC II and IV) includes these longer additions⁹⁰ and is, in the words of Karen King, “bookish.”⁹¹ The longer version makes explicit mention of two books: the “book of Zoroaster” in NHC II 19,10 and the “first book” of Moses in NHC II 22,24. Moreover, the scribes and redactors of the longer version appear to be more conservative with their sources.⁹² A final distinctive feature of the longer version is that it has reworked the text to include three descents of Pronoia (that are then reiterated in the final distinctive hymn)⁹³ and brings in more light imagery.⁹⁴

What is to be made of the divergent treatment of sources and the evolution of distinctive features within the versions?⁹⁵ First, it should be noted that although multiple

⁹⁰ See NHC II 15,29-19,10 and 30,11-31,25, respectively. They are likely additions, the former an insertion from the co-called “book of Zoroaster” the former a free standing hymn. In Tardieu’s reconstruction, the shorter version had access to both of these in an earlier form but omitted them. The longer version simply maintained their use.

⁹¹ King, “Approaching the Variants,” 123.

⁹² Ibid. In addition to maintaining the melothesia section and the final hymn (see n. 90 above), the authors of the longer version seem to be more likely to return to the biblical text (to be demonstrated shortly).

⁹³ On this, see Bernard Barc and Louis Painchaud, “La réécriture de l’Apocryphon de Jean à la lumière de l’hymne final de la version longue,” *Le Muséon* 112 (1999): 317-33.

⁹⁴ On this, see King, *Secret Revelation*, 252-57.

⁹⁵ The question is even more urgent when it is recognized that the *Apocryphon* is also part of a collection of other works. The codices that contain the *Apocryphon* share many of the same works, in the same order. It appears as if there is some sense in which the books are being read together, with some idea of coherence. For further, see Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”* 247-62.

The question may also be applied to the Nag Hammadi library as a whole. How were the texts with their divergent ideas and opinions read as a collection? How were the inconsistencies held in tension with one another? In the first place, it should be noted that the Nag Hammadi “library” likely was not a library. Rather, as the evidence from the cartonnage of the codices demonstrates, the texts found at Nag Hammadi are a secondary collection (for the primary evidence from the cartonnage, see Robinson, “The Construction of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” 184-90 and J. W. B. Barns et al., *Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Cartonnage of the Covers* (NHMS 16; Leiden: Brill, 1981); for arguments as to the significance, see Wisse, “Gnosticism and Early Monasticism in Egypt,” 435; Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* 242).

copies of the *Apocryphon* were found at Nag Hammadi, and although two distinct versions are represented, the texts were not originally compiled so that the long and short version would be read alongside each other. Rather, codicological evidence suggests that each of the versions of the *Apocryphon* was originally copied by independent scribes and bound by distinct book producers.⁹⁶ Thus the comparisons we are equipped to make today as a result of the vagaries of history may not have been available or a concern to the final users of the *Apocryphon*.⁹⁷ Even if they were aware of the different texts, they do not appear to have been concerned about divergent ideas and other inconsistencies. As Michael Williams writes, "...Nag Hammadi (not unlike the New Testament as a collection) illustrates the degree to which intertextual relationships effected by codex production encouraged hermeneutical perspective(s) in terms of which works that to us seem theologically conflicting could come to be read as reflecting the same concerns."⁹⁸ In this way, the two versions could exist alongside each other without issue.

The Continued Use of Scripture in the *Apocryphon*

Two features are of note in the extant copies of the *Apocryphon* that suggest continued use of the scripture in spite of the polemic against early catholics. The rhetoric

They were thus somehow read alongside each other but they were not somehow created to be a distinct corpus.

⁹⁶ See Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 242-44. According to the chart on p. 243, an analysis of the scribal hands, NHC II is a part of scribal Group 3, NHC III is ungrouped, and NHC IV is a part of Group B.

⁹⁷ This point takes on more force if Wisse's theory (discussed above) that the Nag Hammadi codices were the property of individual monks and used for personal reflection.

⁹⁸ Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 241. A similar argument is made by Michael Kaler, "The Cultic Milieu, Nag Hammadi Collectors and gnosticism [*sic*]," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 38 (2009): 427-44, here 432.

against Moses is little more than just that. The first is the so-called Sethianization or de-catholization of the *Apocryphon*. The second is the evidence for continued study of the biblical text, especially evident in NHC II. Each will be discussed briefly in turn.

Sethianization

In Logan's reconstruction of the history of the *Apocryphon* of John, he argues that the "Sethian" reinterpretation of the *Apocryphon* likely occurred toward the beginning of the third century and was provoked by early catholic "criticism of novelty."⁹⁹ What is significant about this turn is that although the Gnostics of the *Apocryphon* are explicitly critiquing Moses, they are turning to his account (esp. Gen 4:25 and 5:3) to develop a myth of "another seed" that comes through Seth. What is striking is that prior to the third century, Gnostic texts show only limited interest in the figure of Seth. It is only after conflicts with the early catholics that Seth comes to play a prominent role.¹⁰⁰

The Aftermath of Creation

After the woman is created, *Ap. John* follows the biblical account, describing how Adam and Zoe (following Gen 3:20 [LXX]) eat from the tree of knowledge (NHC II 23,25-31 and pars.). Although some might read the evaluation of the act as a classic example of "reverse exegesis" (i.e., the *Apocryphon* offers a positive interpretation of Adam and Eve's disobedient act),¹⁰¹ the text nonetheless follows the Genesis account

⁹⁹ Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 45. John Turner, "Sethian Gnosticism: A Literary History," 85-86, argues similarly that the "Sethianization" was a result of conflict with early catholics.

¹⁰⁰ Logan, *Gnostic Truth*, 47. Logan draws attention to the Sethoites of Pseudo-Tertullian, the identification of the 'sons of God' in Gen 6:1 as sons of Seth in Julius Africanus, and the "Apocalypse of Sethel" quoted by Mani.

¹⁰¹ This may be another example of how the text itself led the Gnostic exegetes to their heterodox theological positions. After all, why should Adam and Eve be guilty for desiring knowledge and what kind

closely. In fact, through time, they return to the account for insight. Two examples illustrate the point—the recognition of nakedness in NHC II 23,32-32 and the cursing of the earth in NHC II 23,37.

All three versions explain that Epinoia encouraged Adam and Zoe to eat from the tree of knowledge because they were in a fallen state. Only NHC II, however, narrates the result of their eating from the tree. It reads, “And they recognized their nakedness (ΔΥΘ ΔΥΜΜΕ ΔΠΟΥΚΩΚ ΔΖΗΥ).” This inclusion appears to be secondary. First, neither NHC III nor BG have the line. Thus the principle of multiple attestation supports the shorter reading. Second, and perhaps more convincing, the principle of *lectio brevior* suggests that the line is not original. Third, the theme of realizing (ΜΜΕ) one’s nakedness fits well within the theology of the *Apocryphon* in all the versions—when narrating the rulers’ initial prohibition not to eat of the tree of knowledge, each makes reference to Adam’s ignorance of the fact that he was “stripped of his perfection (ΜΠΕΥΚΩΚ ΔΖΗΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΜ ΠΕΥΧΩΚ).”¹⁰² There would be reason to narrate how, upon eating the fruit, Adam and Zoe came to awareness of their deficiency. It thus makes more sense that the reference to becoming aware of nakedness would be added rather than omitted. Thus, both the internal and external evidence suggests that the line “And they recognized their nakedness” is an addition.

of deity would prohibit growing in wisdom? For a helpful discussion, see Michael Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 68-72.

¹⁰² NHC III 28,6-15//BG 57,8-19//NHC II 22,3-8.

This is significant, as it could be evidence that the author of NHC II/IV returned to the scriptural text. According to Gen 3:7, upon eating the fruit, the first humans' eyes were opened "and they knew that they were naked (καὶ ἔγνωσαν ὅτι γυμνοὶ ἦσαν)." Thus, the addition of this phrase into the narrative at this point brings the narrative into closer alignment with the Mosaic account. Moreover, the Coptic phrase used for "nakedness" in this passage (ⲕⲱⲕ ⲁⲛⲏⲩ) is identical to the phrase used in the Sahidic translation of Genesis 3:10.¹⁰³ This suggests that in spite of the earlier version's insistence that Moses was wrong, the authors of NHC II/IV still returned to the scriptural text.

A similar process is perhaps evident in NHC II 23,37. Again, NHC III and BG agree against NHC II/IV, when they read that Ialdabaoth cursed Adam and Zoe, as a result of their disobedience.¹⁰⁴ NHC II, on the other hand, follows the scriptural account (Gen 3:17 [LXX]) and asserts that Ialdabaoth cursed his *earth* (ⲙⲡⲉⲩⲕⲁⲛⲁ). Again, the external criteria support the shorter version. Likewise, given the general anti-matter stance of the document, it is easier to explain the movement from a curse upon humans to a curse upon the earth rather than vice-versa. Where did the editor of NHC II find the impetus for such a change? The simplest explanation is that the author still viewed the book of Genesis somehow authoritative. In these two minor revisions, then, there is evidence for a later redactor or scribe returning to the biblical text in spite of the persistent claim that Moses was wrong.

¹⁰³ Giversen, "Apocryphon of John and Genesis," 72 n. 16. See also Crum, 101a.

¹⁰⁴ BG 61,10. Unfortunately, NHC III 30,23 has a lacuna at this point. The Facsimile Edition of NHC III confirms the reconstruction of Waldstein and Wisse, *Synopsis*, *ad. loc.* (which, akin to BG, places the curse on Adam and Zoe).

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that although the authors of the *Apocryphon of John* explicitly reject Moses' version of events, their critique of Moses' account does not constitute a rejection of the scriptures. The text from the start was a rewriting of Gen 1-4 and only after Irenaeus' sustained attack did the authors add the criticism as a means to make themselves distinct from early catholics. Even after the corrections were added, they amounted to little more than a rhetorical flourish. This is evident in the fact that the authors follow Moses' account closely, their corrections are minor (if anything at all), and later copyists and redactors felt comfortable returning to the scriptures to find insight. So why then the rejection of Moses? The authors aim to distance themselves from those who find Moses' account authoritative. Their claim that Moses is wrong is simply rhetorical, functioning as an identity marker.

In the late second century, the scriptural text came to be a battleground between various Christian groups.¹⁰⁵ One way in which the various Christian groups distinguished themselves was through their relationship to the text and their interpretive strategy.¹⁰⁶ We see this especially in the reactions of heresy hunters to the arch-heretic

¹⁰⁵ Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 63. He cites Walther Völker, *Das Bild vom nichtgnostischen Christentum bei Celsus* (1928), 79-80.

¹⁰⁶ The latter receives the most attention in the ancient sources—the key question being whether or not one's interpretation adheres to the *regula fidei*. Tertullian in *De praescriptione haereticorum* essentially argues that it is inadvisable for Christians to argue about the meaning of scripture with those who do not adhere to the rule of faith (see e.g., chaps. 15 and 19). Likewise, when Origen refutes what appear to be Gnostic interpretations of scripture, he writes, "On this account we must explain... what are the methods of interpretation that appear right to us, who keep to the rule of the heavenly Church of Jesus Christ through the succession from the Apostles" (*On First Principles* 4.2.2, trans. Butterworth). A classical heterodox example is Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*. For more on this type of argument, see Geoffrey Dunn, "Tertullian's Scriptural Exegesis in *De praescriptione haereticorum*," *J ECS* 14.2 (2006): 141-56; Guy Stroumsa, "Early Christianity: A Religion of the Book?" in *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond: Literary*

Marcion—one of his chief claims to fame (though perhaps unjustifiably¹⁰⁷) is the rejection of the Old Testament.¹⁰⁸ In other words, Marcion is remembered for his attitude to the scriptures.¹⁰⁹ Another good example of this sort of boundary marking comes from a text we have already briefly examined. In the middle of the second century Ptolemy, in his *Letter to Flora* writes,

For some say that [Moses'] law has been ordained by god the father; while others, following the opposite course, stoutly contend that it has been established by the adversary, the pernicious devil; and so the latter school attributes the craftsmanship of the world to the devil, saying that he is “the father and maker of the universe.” But they are utterly in error, they disagree with one another, and each of the schools utterly misses the truth of the matter.¹¹⁰

Here we see in action a clear demarcation of boundaries based on one's view of Moses.

What appears to be happening in the *Apocryphon* is precisely this sort of identity formation—the repudiation of Moses is little more than the staking of a claim. The points at which Moses is rejected are relatively unsubstantial and his account continues to be read, interpreted, and accepted. If this thesis holds, *Ap. John* becomes for us an early example of the relationship between Christian identity and text wherein we can see the complexities involved in becoming a “people of the book.”

and Religious Canons in the Ancient World, ed. Margalit Finkelberg and Guy Stroumsa (JSRC 2; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 153-73, here 172-73; van Campenhausen, *Formation*, 76-77.

¹⁰⁷ See von Campenhausen, *Formation*, 77.

¹⁰⁸ John Clabeaux (“Marcion,” in *ABD* IV:514-16, here 514) in his initial statement introducing Marcion writes, “[Marcion] was a radical Paulinist who rejected the OT writings and organized a church with strong ascetic tendencies.”

¹⁰⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27.2, attacks Marcion for his mistreatment of Luke's Gospel and Paul's letters.

¹¹⁰ Ptolemy, *Letter to Flora* 33.3.2 (trans. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*).

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VITA

David Creech earned his doctorate in Theology with distinction from Loyola University Chicago. Prior to receiving the PhD, David earned a Master in Divinity from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from University of California at Santa Barbara. Since 2009, Dr. Creech has worked as the director of hunger education for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's World Hunger program. He has taught a variety of theology and biblical studies courses at Loyola University Chicago, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, and Judson University. He currently resides in Lake Bluff, IL.

Dr. Creech is a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, the Catholic Biblical Association, and the Chicago Society of Biblical Research. He has actively participated in each of these professional associations by giving papers and serving on committees. While he worked on the PhD, Dr. Creech served first as an On-Campus Student Representative then as the Midwest and Upper-Midwest Member of the Student Advisory Group to the Society of Biblical Literature, the president of the Theology Graduate Student Caucus at Loyola, and the graduate student representative to the Theology Department Graduate Program Committee. He chaired for three years the Loyola-Marquette Theology Graduate Student Colloquium. Dr. Creech has published a chapter in a peer reviewed volume and a journal article in *Biblical Research*. He has

also written book reviews for the *Review of Biblical Literature* and written abstracts for *Religious and Theological Abstracts*.

In addition to academic service, Dr. Creech is involved in his community. He teaches in adult forums in local churches, mentors youth and young adults, and leads informal conversations around theology and ethics. He serves on the board of trustees for Episcopal Charities and is an active member of the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Working Group.